

Dreiser Studies

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A Message from the Editors

With this issue, *Dreiser Studies* ends a thirty-six year run as the editors pass the baton to, well, ourselves. The next time subscribers see our names on a masthead, it will be the masthead of *Studies in American Naturalism*. The decision to expand the journal's scope hasn't come easy. Over the last few years, the number of submissions has dwindled, even with the annual Theodore Dreiser Essay Contest as an incentive to young scholars. We have tried hard to keep the journal current, but as you can tell from how late this issue is, we just haven't managed it—and don't see how we can in the future. Last fall, we explained matters to the editorial board and proposed transforming *Dreiser Studies* into a forum for scholars interested in all phases of literary naturalism. When first the editorial board, and then the membership, encouraged us to go ahead, we set about getting this final issue together while laying the groundwork for the new venture—soliciting essays from prominent scholars, reconstituting the editorial board, designing a cover, preparing publicity.

It's hard not to feel sad about the end of a journal that gave many Dreiserians their start. The move, though, seems to us more a natural progression than an end. When *The Dreiser Newsletter* appeared in the spring of 1970, the year before the centennial of Dreiser's birth, its first editors, Richard Dowell, Robert P. Saalbach, and John Brady, all of Indiana State University, probably weren't thinking of reaching a very broad audience. "Critical articles are welcome," they told prospective authors, "but priority will be given to material of a bibliographic nature." Under the names of the editors were the names of eight "contributing editors," mostly prominent Dreiserians who could be counted on for much of the *Newsletter's* content. In 1987, *The Dreiser Newsletter* became *Dreiser Studies*, but even though the journal doubled in size (from about 20 pages an issue to more than 40), contributing editors remained necessary even though the journal had long since begun to publish many critical essays for a more general audience. Not long after the newly formed International Theodore Dreiser Society took over publication in 1992, an elected editorial board replaced the contributing editors, and by 1997 the journal had moved from Indiana State to the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, where, until the last couple of years, it prospered enough to warrant an improved binding to handle the expanded contents, which in some issues ran to more than 100 pages.

But now the environment has changed, and, to use the Spencerian language Dreiser was fond of, we face a choice of evolution or dissolution. We choose the first.

Steve Brennan
Keith Newlin

May Calvert: Dreiser's Lifelong Teacher

Jack Dvorak
Indiana University

While Theodore Dreiser accomplished much in the literary world, and in several different genres, his formal education was haphazard. He completed only one year of high school and one year of college. During his first six years of schooling in Catholic schools in three Indiana towns, he faced rigid, discipline-oriented religious and lay teachers—causing him to hate school and reject many of the tenets of the Catholic Church. When a small branch of his family moved from Chicago to Warsaw, Indiana, in 1884, Dreiser's outlook on formal schooling would change. He was assigned to the seventh-grade class of (Ida) May Calvert.¹

For the next 58 years, Dreiser and his teacher continued their relationship, which started when she as a young instructor nurtured him through seventh grade. During their middle-aged years, her correspondence with him became increasingly coercive in terms of possible romantic involvement, and during their later years she became more religiously evangelistic toward him. In many ways, she remained his lifelong teacher—or at least attempted to be. Dreiser seemed to maintain a high degree of respect for his former teacher, consistently remembering the stark positive contrast she provided with his earlier Catholic grade-school experiences. Like so many other women in Dreiser's life, May saw in him great intelligence and talent—and was enamored of his fame and role in it. For his part, Dreiser in many instances humored her with letters and occasional visits but didn't seem to return romantic overtures or respond to her conservative religious promptings.

The Move to Warsaw, Indiana

As a young boy, Dreiser and a small element of his large family moved several times within Indiana—and all the while he attended Catholic

schools, which the poor family could ill afford. His early schooling was in Terre Haute, Sullivan, and then Evansville. For a short time in the summer of 1884, the family lived in Chicago.

By the fall of 1884, the nomadic Dreiser family picked up once again and moved to Warsaw, Indiana, in the northern part of the state. Dreiser's mother, Sarah, had inherited five acres of land in nearby Benton, Indiana, so she and the three youngest children once again set out in hopes of a better life. Their furniture from Chicago was repossessed, so they arrived in Warsaw with almost nothing (Swanberg 19).

For Dreiser, the move proved to be a turning point in his life. He recalled that Warsaw provided him with "some of my most helpful as well as most pleasing hours—hours of schooling, of play, of romance, of dreams under the shade of great trees or in swimming holes, lakes, the Tippecanoe River, on ice ponds and snow-covered farms and woodlands that made this region a kind of paradise" (*Dawn* 180-81).

In late October 1884, Sarah Dreiser, despite the protestations of her "hidebound religionist" husband, decided to send Tillie, Theodore, and Ed to the public schools in Warsaw (*Hoosier* 284). Theodore, who had just turned 13, was assigned to the split sixth- and seventh-grade classroom of Miss May Calvert, who was 22 years old at the time. His first day in the class was October 28, according to school records.

Dreiser had a complete turnaround in his attitude toward school in the public school environment, especially because of the influence of his new teacher:

The public school was to me like a paradise after the stern religiosity of this other school. Education began to mean something to me. I wanted to read and to know. There was a lovely simplicity about the whole public school world which had nothing binding or driving about it. The children were urged, coaxed, pleaded with—not driven. Force was a last resort, and rarely indulged in. Can't you see how it was that I soon fell half in love with my first teacher, a big, soft, pink-cheeked, buxom blonde, and with our home and our life here? (*Hoosier* 294)

Dreiser enjoyed the free, intellectual atmosphere of the Warsaw West Ward School and later Central High School, which he attended in eighth and ninth grades. He found the curriculum, in general, to be uplifting and logical, especially compared with the Catholic school experience: "they had no objection to the sane conception of history, botany, sociology, zoology, a hundred fields and avenues of information—which was much more than could



Fig. 1. A young May Calvert, taken at about the time she taught Dreiser in seventh grade, West Ward School in Warsaw, Indiana. (Photo courtesy of Robert Craig)

be said for the Catholics. It was, all in all, a rather free intellectual world in which they lived" (*Dawn* 191).

Upon entering school a bit late that fall, Dreiser found his new teacher to

be a refreshing change from his earlier teachers. He described Miss Calvert as a “chestnut-haired girl . . . whose incorrigible ringlets made a halo about her head and whose laughing brown eyes spoke only of good nature and love of life” (*Dawn* 191). She assigned him the fifth seat from the front in the second row from the west windows (*Hoosier* 317). From that vantage point, he followed her movements carefully and was enthralled by the fact that she taught him in the best sense of the word and that she “spelled opportunity instead of repression.” For schoolwork, she asked that he get copies of Harvey’s *Grammar*, Swinton’s *Geography*, someone else’s arithmetic, and so on (*Dawn* 192).

Dreiser liked the atmosphere of his seventh-grade room in Warsaw, with its “warm, bright space; clean, varnished desks; wide and bright windows, framing what lovely views!” And he appreciated the way Miss Calvert took an interest in him, asking if he liked his new home, his new town, his new school. “And May Calvert, the teacher, with her sunny smile, seated on the platform at the front. Her soft, kind eyes. And her friendly voice. At once, and for some reason, she seemed to take an interest in me” (*Dawn* 192).

For the first time in his elementary school education, 13-year-old Theodore felt comfortable in the classroom. He remembered feeling “more at ease here than anywhere else I had ever been, I think. Her [Miss Calvert’s] eyes, always bent on me so quietly and even appealingly, as it seemed to me” (*Dawn* 192).

Miss Calvert discovered Dreiser’s lack of grammar skills and worked with him during noon hours and after school until he found slight glimmers of understanding, though even in his adult years he disavowed much comprehension of grammar. All the while, however, his teacher encouraged his writing and speaking ability. Dreiser remembered that while she recognized his inability to understand formal grammar, she also thought his writing was excellent: “But, Theodore dear, you write good English. Your longest sentences and paragraphs are correct and orderly. I don’t understand [why your grammar skills are so lacking]” (*Dawn* 193). Such encouragement and writing practice during seventh-grade classes no doubt influenced his writing style as he matured (Hakutani 58).

Dreiser was experiencing puberty during this time, and many of his feelings toward Miss Calvert carried overtones of a crush. His dreamy nature coupled with a love of women that would permeate his adult life showed signs of blossoming during his school year with her:

And somehow, with all this, a growing something that was very close or akin to affection—love even. Her eyes, her pretty mouth, her hair, her pink cheeks! Her face at all close to mine, I

trembled and felt what . . . actually that *she* would put her arm around me and hold me, rather than that I might put my arm around her and hold her. Had words come, they would have been "Love me; love me; love me, please!" And so often her soft eyes looked as though that were true. (*Dawn* 193)

Once, after his reading aloud a passage from "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," Miss Calvert told him, in front of the class, that he read beautifully: "There is something so like outdoors in your voice. You read as you are. It is perfect." With that, Dreiser was embarrassed and thought for a moment that she was making fun of him. But he then realized that she was sincere—and he was quite proud: "I felt a warm, yearning kinship with her for all the while I was in her room thereafter. I wanted to get close to her and hold her. She was so warm and of such a generous mold" (*Dawn* 194).

Also, fairly early into his first term in Miss Calvert's room, she developed the habit of pinching his ear or patting his head as she went down the rows of students, something she presumably did to other students as well. After such incidents, and in marked contrast with his earlier experiences with teachers, Dreiser concluded that she was actually fond of him (*Hoosier* 318).

In substantive ways, Miss Calvert brought him out of his shyness by watching over him, and, according to Dreiser, "expending an affection which I scarcely knew how to take." And despite her noon-hour and after-school tutoring sessions with him in grammar, he never did connect to that discipline. She would simply pinch his cheek affectionately and say something like "well, don't you worry; you can get along without grammar for a while yet. You'll understand it later on" (*Hoosier* 318). Dreiser recalled one day toward the end of the school year when his attraction to Miss Calvert was particularly strong and she had asked him to stay after school for some extra help with grammar:

Leaning over her desk following the details of her advice, I felt her hair brush my cheek. Finally I felt her hand on my shoulder. I snuggled up to her, because I was magnetically drawn and because I thought she was lovely. I could scarcely think of what she was telling me. I wanted to put my arms about her, but I did not dare. I went home that night elated and yet disappointed. I felt that I was entitled to cling close and love her, and yet I had not the courage. This relationship between us existed without interruption until the end of the year. (*Dawn* 194-95)

Another of Miss Calvert's educational gifts to Dreiser was simply her

explaining how to get a library card. In those days, children needed sponsors, or guarantor adults, to vouch for them as library patrons. She signed his card, and he checked out dozens of books from the public library, which was housed in the basement of Warsaw's Central High School. Dreiser was awed by the privilege and marveled at the "shelves upon shelves of books; and all open to me for the asking!" (*Dawn* 198)

At the end of the most significant school year he had experienced thus far, Dreiser passed all of his examinations at the West Ward School and emerged full of self-confidence even as he felt a deep kinship with May Calvert. While he was cleaning out his desk of books and papers, she put her arms around him and kissed him goodbye. He later recalled of that fateful day in late May: "the warm, spring sunlit afternoon, the beauty and the haunting sense of the waning of things that possessed me at the time. I went home, to think and wonder about her" (*Hoosier* 318).

Of 18 students in this idyllic classroom, 10 were promoted to the eighth grade, among them Theodore Dreiser.² In those days, Indiana had yet to have a compulsory school-attendance law,³ so seven of the other students withdrew before the school year was completed. One was passed conditionally. With all the extra tutoring from Miss Calvert, Dreiser earned a 79 (on a 100-point scale) in Grammar. Somewhat surprisingly, he earned only an 87 in Writing, the sixth highest in the class, and in Spelling he came up with a 78 for the year.⁴ However, in Reading he earned 94.3, his highest grade, and in Geography (another favorite subject), he earned a 92. In his other subjects, he earned a 77 in Arithmetic and an 83.5 in Drawing. His composite Average Scholarship grade was 85, tied for 5th highest in the class of 18 students. One other area on the report card was Deportment, and his loving teacher gave him G grades (presumably standing for "Good") during all three terms and for the final assessment.

During the next school year, his eighth-grade teacher at Central High was Luella Reid, whom he found terrifying at first, especially in comparison with Miss Calvert, but whom he soon learned to admire and appreciate, "and at the end of the year parted from her with regret" (*Dawn* 243).

In his freshman year of high school (1886-1887, his only high school experience), he had two excellent teachers whom he remembers: Alvira Skarr and Mildred Fielding. The latter would prove to be influential a few years later, for, seeing his real academic potential, she looked him up while he was working odd jobs in Chicago in the summer of 1889 and urged him to attend Indiana University in Bloomington at her expense. A letter to IU president David Starr Jordan got Dreiser the waivers he needed to attend with such little high-school education.

During his high-school freshman year in Warsaw Dreiser again encountered May Calvert, who had married Henry Newton Baker in Warsaw on December 23, 1885, a few months after she taught Dreiser, and had the next year in Indianapolis given birth to her only child—Jessie Barbara Baker. The sight of May and her baby destroyed any lingering romantic notions he might have felt for her:

I saw her a year or so later, a much stouter person, married and with a baby, and I remember being very shocked. She didn't seem the same, but she remembered me and smiled on me. For my part, not having seen her for so long a time, I felt very strange and bashful—almost as though I were in the presence of one I had never known. (*Hoosier* 318-19)

Intervening Years

Dreiser and May Calvert Baker would lose track of each other for the next 31 years. During the first 10 years, she was a housewife, but she divorced Henry Newton Baker in about 1895. In a letter written to Dreiser many years later, she described her marriage as loveless—one she had no business entering. She also referred to her former husband as “Mr. Haymaker,” indicating that he was, perhaps, physically abusive (29 March 1919).⁵

By 1900, she and her 14-year-old daughter were living with her parents, Jesse and Barbara Calvert, in Warsaw, where her father was a Dunkard minister in the Church of the Brethren.⁶ Census data from that year show that she was again teaching school, though in years following, she moved to nearby Huntington, Indiana, where in 1918 she was a sixth-grade teacher at William Street School, at the corner of William and Hannah streets.⁷

When Dreiser published *A Hoosier Holiday* in 1916, a friend of May's from Indianapolis sent her a copy. Touched by Dreiser's accounts of his seventh-grade experiences in her class and surprised at his belief that she had died, she wrote him the following letter to re-establish their friendship:

My dear Theodore:

Ever since first seeing your name in print I have wondered if you were “my” Theodore Dreiser and now the *Hoosier Holiday* tells me that you are and I am so glad that you have made good. You see I am glad not to have misplaced my confidence in you. Always every bit of the mother-teacher in me is very glad when one of my hundreds of pupils distinguishes himself.

You see I am not dead but very much alive and still teaching the young to aspire, to strive and if possible to win.

Win what I wonder. It does not appear that you have won happiness with fame. Your book hurts me because of your evident disappointment. Yet we love life.

Thank you for the beautiful story of your first term in Warsaw. I am glad I was that teacher, but I think I am a much better one now. Please write and say you are glad I am not dead and I'll tell you more of the people of Warsaw of your time.

Your interested old teacher.

May Calvert Baker

R.R. 1

Huntington, Ind.

Less than a week later, Dreiser would respond to the unexpected and surprising letter that seemed to affirm her influence on him and his affection for her. The secondary salutation ("Dear Miss Calvert") would seem to indicate that he longed for their past relationship while disavowing her married state:

Feb. 15, 1917

Dear Mrs. Baker—

Or perhaps better—Dear Miss Calvert—

Nothing could be nicer than to have you write me as you did. It pleased me so much that I was happy all day long. You see you are and have always been an integral part of my most pleasing memories. . . . I haven't been as happy as I should have been, all things considered perhaps and all to a bad disposition I suppose. I am not as happy yet as I will be—who is. . . . And I'm so glad you're not dead and still able to write me that day I went into the school room and found my little desk—or one just like it—it was you I was thinking of. . . .

Yes I wish you would write me and tell me about yourself. Nearly all I can tell is in *Hoosier Holiday* and my earlier books. I have been working, working, working and still am. The teacher who came to me in Chicago was Miss Fielding—may the deep fates keep her whole. (What does not America owe to its teachers! I want to write several things about them some day collectively and singly—and that last means you and others.) I have thought of you for years, always with pink cheeks and a warm girlish smile and kind eyes—haloed by the affection and the

fancy of youth.

There must be many other boys and girls who have carried you onward in the same way.

All my best wishes and thoughts to you. If I had known where you were we would have motored over that summer. Would that I had.

Your

Theodore Dreiser

Do you recall that I couldn't learn grammar? I don't know a single thing about it yet.

In the 30 letters she wrote to Dreiser between 1917 and 1941, Calvert often referred to her relationship to him as teacher—both past and present—as well as to her hardships, her appreciation of nature, and her staunch religious beliefs (unlike Dreiser's attitude). On several occasions, she invited him to visit her in Indiana, and on one occasion Dreiser invited her to visit him in New York.

After receiving Dreiser's letter in February 1917, May responded to reaffirm the necessity of balancing youthful dreams and life's disappointments: "I do hope the next thirty years of our lives will be kinder to us and that we may see the fulfillment of some of the dreams of youth. I am sure the dreams are not sent in vain." She described her difficult life thus far, but she balanced the hardships (divorcing after 10 years of marriage, raising a daughter by herself, and farming to supplement her teacher's income of \$675 per year) by recounting her pleasant role as a teacher:

I love it. It is hard work and much of it unappreciated but one letter like yours repays much effort. Few of the hundreds of pupils have shown such thoughtfulness. But since you have written so beautifully about me others have added their appreciation until I begin to feel that I have really been of some use in the world—of use to others for so far as my young dreams are concerned I am a dismal failure.

Of her approach to teaching, she explained, "I have always tried to do it well and let conscience reward for there is neither money nor glory in teaching. When you write your book about teachers I hope you will make this great, rich country ashamed forevermore, of the salaries paid its teachers."

In the following summer, amid war-time rationing May was recuperating from a "strenuous summer's work at home . . . [tending to] a large garden and some little chicks, which I am trying to raise to do my bit toward increasing the food supply" (16 July 1917). She wrote the letter from her

hotel room at Culver, Indiana, on Lake Maxinkuckee, where she was enjoying a short vacation. She encouraged Dreiser to write again because she had “few greater pleasures in my life than your book [*A Hoosier Holiday*] and your letter.” In her role as lifelong teacher, she continued, “Your *Hoosier Holiday* will always be a joy to me, but the McConnells are terribly offended at the true picture you drew of their parents. Well it is too bad they are so misunderstanding and the others too of the Warsaw ‘elite’ are having horrors that you dared to tell the truth about some of their friends.” Her religious nature showed when she continued: “Wonder what they will do with the recording angel when he unrolls the record of their lives?” She concluded by issuing the first of many invitations for Dreiser to visit her in Indiana: “[M]aybe you will like the ugly old woman a little for the sake of the young school teacher you liked better. I shall enjoy talking to you.”

Her letter reached Dreiser as he was writing in the country near Westminster, Maryland. He replied that he was hard at work on *The Bulwark* and on *Newspaper Days*. His own love of nature, which he had in common with May, was apparent when he described the restorative effects of his wooded surroundings: “I feel as cheerful & youthful as ever I did—just now anyhow. Mentally I think. We never grow old or change much—some of us anyhow. But physically we don’t do so well do we?” He mentioned that he was 6 ft. 1½ inches tall and weighed 190 pounds. He ended the letter affectionately: “And don’t think I am forgetting you. If I have thought of you once I have done so 100 times” (23 July 1917).

Dreiser was a fastidious saver of correspondence and of mundane things like grocery and pharmacy lists. But for some reason, no correspondence is available between him and May Calvert Baker until several months following the July 1917 letter he wrote to her. At some point before she wrote him on March 29, 1918, Dreiser had sent her a letter and a story about the difficulties with married life, which she agreed with whole-heartedly following her own unpleasant 10-year marriage. Her teaching-mentoring was evident: “Perhaps people will sometime measure up to their highest ideals but it will take some time to train a generation of high thinkers and right livers. I think the time is coming but not in the way you could believe therefore it is not worth mentioning—my plan I mean.” But May also sought to steer Dreiser to sunnier topics: “That your books are true I never doubted but we have to see so much of tragedy in real life why not give us some nice idealistic things to read about. Is it not as ennobling to hold up lofty ideals and the sort of person one ought to be as to show us over and over our mean little selves which we know too well now?”

As one of the early naturalists in American literature, Dreiser was proba-

bly amused but not swayed by this idealistic bit of encouragement.

May invited Dreiser to visit northern Indiana during the end of May or June 1918, when she would “show you enough stories in real life to keep you busy for years. It is spring in your native land just the first delicate etching is to be seen. It is so very lovely. How I pity city people and how they would pity me!!”

A Reunion in New York

Later that summer, May traveled to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to attend the National Education Association convention before going to Englewood, N.J., to visit a friend. Because of Englewood's proximity to New York City, she suggested that she and Dreiser meet while she was in the east (21 June 1918). When they finally met, after a 32-year separation, on Sunday, July 21, 1918, they must have cruised or paddled on the Hudson or East River, for she referred to their delightful day on the river in a subsequent letter.

Later that month, May read Dreiser's “The Country Doctor,” published in the July 1918 *Harper's*. Once again she assumed the role of teacher when she wrote, “Dear Dr. Woolley he was our family physician so long. It is such a dear story and I like that side of you so much—that is your real self. You were as kind to him as you were to me a week ago today. Such a good day it was. . . . Thanking you for pleasures enjoyed” (28 July 1918).

In a short letter written to May on August 29, 1918, Dreiser apologized for not writing recently but said that he would go to the Twin Cities of Minnesota soon for a paddlewheel trip down the Mississippi River to New Orleans—and that he would stop to see her in Huntington on his way to Minnesota.

May responded on September 4, 1918, that she was delighted he might be coming to visit her: “I can hardly believe it and I suppose it will turn out to be a dream as so many of my plans have.” She suggested that he come on a Thursday or Friday and then stay the weekend, for she would be going back to her teaching job soon and wouldn't have much time to visit on weekdays. She also wished she had room in her home for his secretary but felt she could “not make more than one guest comfortable.” At that time, four people were living with her: her daughter Jessie, Jessie's husband, Samuel Craig, and their two children, Calvert and Virginia.

The trip Dreiser was scheduled to make on the Mississippi River was canceled, so he didn't see May and her family that fall. She didn't know about the change of plan when she wrote him from Huntington on October 13, 1918, noting that his absence diminished her enjoyment of the foliage:

Don't you know you are missing the loveliest autumnal coloring and the balmiest days and bluest skies that ever settled down on dear Indiana in any wonderful October.

Your letter of Aug. 29 says coming soon and six weeks is not "soon," and I have had to see a thousand beautiful things fade away without your appreciation to make me enjoy them more. Although I have loved them till it hurt my heart, they have been so exquisite. Such a riot of color and still not enough frost to kill the flowers so we have had autumn and summer at the same time and my front porch looks out on endless vistas of all that is lovely. And I get more and more fearful that you are not coming at all. Do you think you are?

Soon thereafter she learned that he had canceled his Mississippi trip to attend to details of a proposed production of *The Hand of the Potter* (that eventually fell through), with rehearsals starting in November. Dreiser wrote, "Since I have to help on those [rehearsals] I have stuck here wishing all the time I could come and live in your little house a week and rest. Your description of fall there makes it all the worse." He then asked her if she was happy and ended by writing, "I think of you often and our day on the river. It was charming" (19 Oct. 1918).

A curious romantic undercurrent is present in May's letters to Dreiser during the next year or so, while Dreiser continues to see her only as his beloved former teacher. At this time (October 1918), she was 56 and he was 47, so the age difference wasn't that great. But Dreiser always had a penchant, both in his private life and in his novels, for younger women, so it is unlikely that he returned the romantic longing.

In her letter to him of October 24, 1918, she wrote that she was disappointed he was not coming for a visit that fall but was happy *The Hand of the Potter* was going forward. Then she issued a rather surprising invitation:

I have a plan for you to come here and rest for a month or six weeks next spring. I believe it would do you as much good as my rest of last summer did me. If my daughter moves away and I can find someone to help with the work maybe we can arrange it. I should love it and I believe if you came here to live away from that hard, merciless New York life would not seem quite so tragic to you and I do so want to restore your faith in the ultimate good of everything. It is the only way to make life bearable.

Am I happy? If I am busy I am at least content and that is the next door to happiness. But you must never remind me that I said

this—I think that pure happiness in this world is attained only when one has met and loved the complement soul of his own. I feel that I have missed that but have many compensations in my life instead of it. So I am happy and glad most of the time save for one great big sorrow that will always shadow my life. I'll tell you about that if I ever have opportunity. When you come here to live for a month or two maybe.

She referred to the upcoming Thanksgiving—and how she would count her blessings: “I wonder if you know that I count you as one of my blessings? You seem such a real part of my life and interest me more than most people do. Then you have so much more intellect than most of them that you are a stimulant as well as a pleasure.” She went on to chastise him for being so stingy with his own feelings in letters and for writing such short ones:

Do be a bit charitable and write me more of yourself and write often. . . . I relive our day on the river very often; it is a red-letter day in my life. I did enjoy it so much. Come out for a little visit whenever you can. I will be glad to have you. If you hurry we might have a campfire under the trees some evening. We had a delightful one last week.

Dreiser responded, “I’m glad I’m one of your blessings. An elusive blessing—What?” He mentioned that his commitments in New York would probably keep him from visiting Indiana until the spring or summer of the following year. He also wrote that New York didn’t make him “any sadder or more cynical than any other place in America or elsewhere. Life makes me sad—not cynical.” He later referred to his many projects being developed or having been recently published, complaining that “as usual the critics discuss me most savagely, but I can stand it. I’m used to it. And besides they become more ridiculous every year” (13 Nov. 1918).

In her reply after Thanksgiving that year, she addressed him as “Dear Boy: I am your mother today hence the address. Your good letter came to cheer my Thanksgiving Day and eve. I need cheer sometimes and I have worked to the point of mental exhaustion every day, trying to make up for the time we lost while the schools were closed on account of the influenza.” May explained that her family usually got together with her mother’s side—the Anglemyers—for Thanksgiving, and she wished Theo could have joined them because she had been so lonesome for him. She also drew upon her religious faith to encourage Dreiser to do the same and to view his critics as part of his education:

I do not think you cynical and I feel the same throbbing, beating pity for humanity that you do. That sympathy is Christ like—and in that you are your best and greatest self. Do not call it dullness that is youth . . . we believed everything to be as it ought. Everything is as it must be until we—the whole race shall come under and into harmony with God—his children—all the same before Him and all with equal rights. But the strong have taken unto themselves the rights of the weak and things are in an awful muddle and I do not know how to straighten it out and neither does any other mere human. All we can do is to let law take its course while we alleviate and help as much as we can.

As to our own lives they seem to matter to no one on earth but ourselves and if we should have exactly what we planned in that “dull” (natural) youth, would you change that ideal of yourself for what you know you are now? Every blow you have had, every disappointment withstood has added to your strength and to your bigness.

Why should you care for critics? You do all the better work because they hammer at you so industriously. So you are being developed at their expense. “Sweet are the uses of adversity” says somebody.

She again invited Dreiser to come for a visit—as early as Christmas when she had a little vacation time, “[b]ut we will have other family guests at that time and we should have very little time together. The spring will be a beautiful time to come but you will be welcome any time you can get away.” May was interested in hearing about the play’s production and hoped Dreiser would send reviews: “Always you are to remember that I am interested in *everything* you do and think and say” (29 Nov. 1918).

In a letter of April 8, 1919, May scolded Dreiser for not writing since November of the previous year. She thought it might have been because her last letter was too “mothering,” and she pleaded with him to answer this one: “I hate to force your letters but I love to get them and surely you can do that much for the sake of old times.” May clearly was yearning a strong personal relationship—if not a romantic one. Dreiser’s slow responses are indicative of his busy lifestyle and his desire to keep her at a distance.

Because school would be out in seven weeks, she invited him to visit when she had some free time: “I have the maple syrup all ready for your flapjacks and ham and cream are on tap in this good country. . . . Are you coming to Huntington in June?”

Dreiser replied that he wasn’t offended by her mothering letter: “Your

letters are interesting and to me, charming. . . . If I come out in May can I stay three or four days. I'd really like to come for a short rest." He had just finished *Twelve Men*, which he urged her to read: "It's different and very American." He also mentioned that recently he had published a book of short stories, *Free and Other Stories*, and that even though his "*Genius*" case had been dismissed on a technicality, "I'll eventually win my point I think" (15 April 1919).⁸

May was elated to get his letter—and was "delighted that you are really coming to see me." But she begged him to stay longer than the three or four days that he had proposed: "[T]here is so much that I want to say to you and so many nooks and corners of the garden to show you that I do not think we can do it all in three days." Her school ended that year on May 28, and she asked Dreiser to come a few days after that so she could better prepare for his visit. She also wanted him to come when the roses were in bloom: "I want you to be here at the most beautiful time of the year for I realize that nature's are the only attractions." She suggested that she might go to Indianapolis with him at the end of his northern Indiana visit because she had friends there (24 April 1919).

Dreiser responded that she shouldn't have written so dolefully " 'since the roses are the only attraction.' You don't know" (2 May 1919).

May knew she was dealing with a sophisticated New Yorker who had given up his Indiana allegiance long ago. However, she kept appealing to his love of nature and the contrast between Easterners and Hoosiers in an attempt to entice him to visit:

So glad you can come when the roses bloom. I am hoping for some good weather now. We have been having all of Indiana's fifty-seven varieties this season. I do want every thing as lovely as possible when you come. For you know the ignorant New Yorkers' thinking there is nothing worth seeing in our Indiana. I want you to tell them how mistaken they are.

No wonder I think nature the only attraction here when they say we are "cowlike" "dull" "self satisfied" "uncultured." . . . You see I think they mean it and it makes me modest. (6 May 1919)

At the end of May, she once again wrote to remind him that school was now over—and that he should come for a visit any time during the week of June 10 because by that time the strawberries would be ripe. She also advised him to bring some country clothes for tramping around gardens, woods and countryside, "for this will be no swell society affair but just

country quiet. Think I will have one little dinner—did plan a reception but thought it would bore you. Anyway want you to myself most of the time” (29 May 1919).

Dreiser Visits Northern Indiana

Dreiser delayed his trip because on May 11 a car knocked him down, with one wheel running over him, as he was crossing Columbus Circle in New York City. At Roosevelt Hospital, he was treated for shock, a gash in his scalp, a couple of broken ribs, and cuts and bruises on his left arm, right hand, and right side. However, he spent only one night in the hospital (Swanberg 285). He wrote to May in early June that he was healing quickly and looked forward to “drifting out your way & resting on your porch—around the 15th. Does that agree. Glad your work is over & I hope you can really rest & enjoy the summer. The war being over your nerves are—probably—in better shape” (2 June 1919).

May replied that she was sorry he was hurt and that she liked his plan for travel and arrival (5 June 1919). At 12:10 p.m. on June 16, Dreiser arrived by train in Huntington—where May Calvert Baker and a friend, Charles Arnold (who owned a car), met him at the station (*American Diaries* 259). His visit was anything but the quiet interlude May had been imagining. Indeed, Dreiser was busy visiting with Huntington luminaries like the superintendent of schools, country club elite, friends of May, and newspaper reporters from *The Indianapolis News* and *The Huntington Press* (*American Diaries* 260–61).

At some point during the drive to and from Warsaw, May discussed the possibility of helping Dreiser promote his books in Indiana. Dreiser had been upset that his books were not selling well in his native state, and May thought that his publisher, Boni & Liveright, should put together entire sets of his books. She could then visit various bookstores around Indiana, putting up posters and otherwise promoting sales (Swanberg 287).

The following day, June 19, May and Dreiser went west with her friends the Caswells to Lake Maxinkuckee at Culver, Indiana, where May had vacationed the previous summer and where she had attended several religious revivals through the years. On this day Dreiser took May rowing and fishing on the lake until 9 in the evening. On June 20, they visited Culver Military Academy, which seemed to impress Dreiser, and then he and May sat on the porch, went swimming, had dinner, went boating, and then talked on the large veranda of the Lake View Hotel from 9 to 11 p.m. On Saturday, June 21, because the Caswells were driving to Chicago from Culver, Dreiser and

May decided to take the train back to Huntington. They arrived at 10:30 p.m.—and sat on her stone balcony for a while before retiring (*American Diaries* 262).

After two days of visiting May's Glenn Elm (Huntington) home, Dreiser left for Indianapolis, thoroughly worn out by his visit. As he confided to his diary on June 24, "Horribly tired. Breakfast at 9. May C is greatly grieved at my going. Her offers of a home" (*American Diaries* 263). It's hard to tell what May actually meant by "offers of a home." But in a letter to Dreiser while he was still in Indianapolis, she once again invited him to Huntington—this time for the Fourth of July celebrations: "Please say you are coming for the 'Fourth,' and I'll love you forever and a day" (26 June 1919). In response to a thank-you letter he had written her from Indianapolis, she chided him for evidently addressing her as "Daisy." "If there is a name on the face of the earth that I abominate it's *Daisy* and you know it does not fit. I am anything but a daisy. Don't caricature me any more than you have to."

In the same letter, which has decidedly romantic overtones, May revealed her desire for deeper attachment:

Now for the truth—I miss you dreadfully and to think of you going back to New York without another glimpse of you gives me the horrors. Won't you please come back this way and go by the Erie [Railroad]. I won't tell a soul you are here and you can spend the night and stay next day till three and go on and no one need know. Come for the glorious 'Fourth.' The Craigs are sure to picnic all that day and we can have one more good talk.

While Dreiser was still in Indianapolis, May wrote another letter in which she described a lovely sunset: "I enjoyed it while I wished you might see it with me." Further, she told him that she was writing from "your room . . . enjoying the birds outside and the trees at the roadside. Wish that dead elm was out of the bunch. It spoils the effect. Please come and cut it out. So glad you are coming soon again—'Maybe.' Something to live for." And she finished: "Please think how lonely I am and write often and long" (1 July 1919).

Evidently Dreiser did not reciprocate May's romantic feelings, as his diary entry of June 26, written in Indianapolis, referred to a letter from "Mrs. Baker" (*American Diaries* 265). And thereafter, May's letters to him carried a more motherly, supportive educator's tone. As for his trip to Indiana, he left Indianapolis on the train bound east for Toledo, Ohio, in the early morning of July 1—without a return stop in Huntington.

Back in New York the following month, Dreiser wrote May that part of



Fig. 2. From left: Virginia Craig (May's granddaughter); Lida Craig [*sic*] (May's granddaughter-in-law); May Calvert Baker; and Jessie B. Craig (May's daughter). Picture taken in the early 1930s in Richmond, Indiana. (Photo courtesy of Robert Craig)

her plan for promoting his books was accepted by Boni & Liveright; that is, they would pull together his collected works and try to promote them with a flier. He asked her for an estimate of her expenses for traveling to bookstores around the state to promote the books (16 Aug. 1919). He wrote that he would be sending her more of his books and wanted her to read them all before she embarked upon a promotional tour.

Evidently as a result of her talks with Dreiser in Indiana, May had decided to sell her small farm home north of Huntington. She wrote, "I am trying my best to sell my place. I am so tired doing all that hard work. It is lovely I know but it is a man's job. Your visit helped me so much in many ways. You inspired me to go forward to the next thing rather than stay there" (21 Aug. 1919). She wrote the letter from Lake Maxinkuckee, where she and Dreiser had visited in June. She was leaving that same day for Warsaw and Lake Winona, where a Bible conference featuring the evangelist

Billy Sunday was taking place.

Dreiser's views, in marked contrast to those of the evangelist, were expressed in his book of essays, *Hey Rub-A-Dub-Dub* (1920), which he told May he would send to her if she would read it and meditate on it. "But I would like to know," he wrote, "if it gets to you—in an intellectual way" (13 Feb. 1920).

No further correspondence between them survives until more than 11 years later. By 1931, when *Dawn* was published, May had evidently given up her desire for romantic attachment, for she wrote, "Today I received a letter from a friend in Boston who has read your new book and thinks you paid me another compliment. I'll get the book and read it, and I thank you." She had apparently accepted her old role as lifelong, nurturing teacher: "I am glad you still think of me for I think of you so much and still love the little boy Theodore. That is what you will always be to me" (12 June 1931).

May's Retirement and a Final Visit

May Calvert Baker retired from teaching in December 1926, though in all likelihood, Dreiser did not know of her retirement at that time. In her June 1931 letter, she informed him that she had moved to Indianapolis to live with her daughter, Jessie Craig, and her two grandchildren (by this time, Jessie had divorced her husband and was teaching in the Indianapolis public schools): "We have a very comfortable home and I and all the family want you to come and visit us again. Your other visit is one of the bright spots in my life so come and make another" (12 June 1931). Dreiser replied several weeks later that he was very busy with various projects and was sorry not to have responded sooner. "I'm glad indeed to know that you're so happily situated, and I hope it will be possible for me to visit you again sometime. I remember the last time with pleasure" (17 July 1931).

Sometime soon thereafter, when May was about 70 years old, she was diagnosed with diabetes. A close friend from the Warsaw area, Shirley L. Miller, wrote to Dreiser on May's behalf in October 1932, indicating that May had suffered all summer from diabetes and had moved to the Winona Lake area in the spring "to spend her final days." However, a specialist in Indianapolis treated May and she recovered a great deal during the late summer and early fall (30 Oct. 1932). Soon thereafter she returned to her daughter's home at 3830 Carrollton Avenue in Indianapolis.

Dreiser wrote her after getting the news: "I can't tell you how sorry I am to hear that you are ill. A trip to the West Coast . . . has kept me very busy, or I would have written before. I do hope it is nothing serious and that it

will soon be over. Won't you ask someone to keep me informed of your progress, if you can't send me a line yourself which, of course, would be best of all" (23 Nov. 1932).

May replied within a few days: "Your nice letter was a delightful surprise and helped to make a whole day happier. I am having such a tiresome convalescence. My hands are so numb I can't write and my feet so numb I can not walk much" (29 Nov. 1932).

Despite her weakening health, May was ever the teacher to Dreiser. In her declining years, religion came to preoccupy her, and she sought to instill the same religious fervor in Dreiser, whom she knew was leading a troubled life: "I wish I could make you happy. Come out and let me be your teacher for a few hours. I'll try to do a better job than that of long ago. Life has done a lot to me but I try to be happy and to feel that my destiny is in the hand of One who knows me and my needs. Always with love and sympathy. . . . Your *old* teacher" (15 Nov. 1933).

Three years passed before the next correspondence. May wrote that she had read a newspaper account about attempts to raise money to build a memorial in Terre Haute to Paul Dresser, Theo's deceased older brother, who was a famous songwriter and performer. She thought that Dreiser might come to Indiana for the opening of the memorial, and she once again invited him to stay with the family in Indianapolis for a few days "or as long as you care to stay in your old home state." She reported that she was feeling much better and that she yearned for contact: "[Y]ou know I never lose interest in my boys. I want to talk with you" (25 Feb. 1936).

Dreiser knew of the efforts to build a memorial in Terre Haute to his brother Paul. He wrote to her that in 1924 the Wabash River town in west central Indiana had secured a federal grant of \$35,000 to help build the memorial but that nothing had been done about it in the intervening years. He had helped with the initial fund-raising efforts and publicity but was miffed that he had not been invited to be more involved. In fact, he would attend the opening of the memorial only if extended a personal invitation—and if he were, he would certainly come to Indianapolis to visit her and her family once again. He concluded, "I never enjoyed a visit more than the one I paid to you back in 1917.⁹ And I am delighted to know that you are in good health and spirits, and able to invite me again. You will always be May Calvert to me—the teacher that made the public school a sort of Paradise" (7 March 1936).

With this last bit of praise, May was thrilled, just as she had been when she read his accounts of her teaching in *A Hoosier Holiday* and *Dawn*: "You made the happiest day for me when you wrote that letter. Nothing gives me

so much pleasure as to think I have done some little good in the world.” She mentioned that they could attend the Paul Dresser Memorial dedication together, that she had some good friends with a “comfy car” who would drive them to Terre Haute, and that he would be a welcome guest in the simple home “we love to share.” “Be a good boy as of old and *come*,” she wrote, closing with “We will turn back 54 years¹⁰ and again I’ll be—as ever your teacher” (12 March 1936).

Dreiser did make a quick trip to Indiana in May 1936, not for the Paul Dresser Memorial dedication, but for a talk at Purdue University in West Lafayette. He wasn’t able to visit May at that time.

The following year, May wrote to tell Dreiser that she had spent nine weeks of the summer at Lake Winona in Warsaw: “It is so lovely. Lovelier than I ever saw it for this is such an unusually lovely summer. I wished for you and told Jack Shoup.¹¹ I wanted to have a reunion of our old-time friends he said very few were left. But you are left and I think its time you redeemed your promise to visit me here in my home.” She had once again shared their mutual appreciation of nature, she wrote, when in preparing to speak to a book club recently she had reread several portions of *A Hoosier Holiday*. “I could fully feel your thoughts for I feel the same way when I go to the lake region of our loved state.” Her evangelism as well as her role as his lifelong teacher are apparent as she urged him to recover his lost faith: “And now I am saying something to you that takes a lot of courage and please understand that it’s my regard for my dear pupil that make[s] me say it. The wonderful happy spirit of your early boyhood was the spirit of God. You were born with it and you were happy. You let misfortunes stifle it and I am praying God to revive it in you. Then you’ll be happy forever. Come and let me talk to you.” She signed the letter, “Lovingly and prayerfully” (10 Sept. 1937).

The following summer, May’s religious fervor was once again demonstrated when she wrote, “I am at Winona Lake and the lovely lake and landscape around it and the great Bible teachers make me long for you. Suppose you fly over so as to be here the last of [the month] when Harry Rimmer and Herbert Beiber and Louis Bauman (some of the best) will speak. I am at the Square Deal a cottage near the administration building. Come register and enjoy your boyhood home.” She closed the letter, “Please don’t think I am bold and brazen. I am only your interested and affectionate—Old teacher” (22 Aug. 1938).

Her religious leanings continued to be evident in her next letter: “A friend brought me your story ‘The Tithe of the Lord’ and I am so happy over it. That is the kind of story I have always wanted you to write. You can

be one of the mightiest instruments for good in the world if you go on in this path" (9 Oct. 1938).

Because of his father's religious dogmatism, Dreiser had developed a cynical attitude toward formal religion as a young child. Despite May's continual pleadings, Dreiser would not be persuaded to take up regular religious practice, let alone come to the fundamentalist revivals of which she was so enamored. But in a very real sense, Dreiser was a deep thinker about spiritual matters, and through the study of nature and science he discovered what he called illustrations "of the supreme genius of this Creative Force that so over-awes me" (*Notes on Life* 332). He was a believer, but he despised the rigors of formal practice.

Dreiser, consistently worried about income, embarked on a lecture tour in the fall of 1938. On November 12, he was scheduled to be the keynote speaker at the National Scholastic Press Association's annual convention in Indianapolis. He wrote to May that his train would be coming to Indianapolis the morning of the speech, so he would go directly to the lecture hall from the station—and then visit with her in the afternoon and stay the night at the Craig home before leaving for Detroit, and another lecture, the next day (25 Oct. 1938).

May replied, "I returned from Winona Lake yesterday P.M. and found your letter. Imagine my joy. Out of one happiness into another! Winona and the weather were perfect and I saw many old friends and now the crowning happiness—I am to see *you*" (26 Oct. 1938). She suggested that she put together a reception for him following the talk to NSPA in Indianapolis; she asked whom he wanted to attend but confessed that she wanted to occupy most of his time.

Before he came to Indianapolis for the talk, Dreiser had his secretary, Harriet Bissell, write to Paul B. Nelson, editor and publisher of *The Scholastic Editor*, to find out the nature of the audience—and to see if he could change his topic from "What Makes Good Writing" to "To Barcelona and Back" (3 Nov. 1938).¹² Nelson checked with NSPA executive director Fred L. Kildow, and they agreed that the change of topics would be fine. Nelson also explained that "Mr. Dreiser's address will be the final and climaxing feature of the NSPA convention, and the attendance will be nearly two thousand high school students and faculty advisers, who are interested in journalism and undergraduate publishing work" (8 Nov. 1938).

May, not knowing the subject of Dreiser's lecture, wrote him on October 26, 1938, with some suggestions for topics. She thought he should talk about God (upset paganism), Home (talk God and his love, majesty and power) and America (obedience to this). And because he was talking to a

group of (young) journalists, she wrote,

Tell them to try psychology and write on high and good ideals and try to redeem us from the awful pact they made in Paris at the close of the war. To tell the bad, nasty sex stuff they could find about poor weak mortals. Look what it has done! It will take another generation to restore decency to America and I blame the journalists more than the war or any one else except the Devil who is very glad to use them.

Now laugh!

In a letter of November 2, 1938, May complained to Dreiser that his stay in Indianapolis would be too short and urged him to come at least one day earlier than November 12 for the NSPA talk. However, Dreiser's plans did not change. He arrived the morning of November 12, gave his talk, stayed with May and the Craigs at 3830 Carrollton in Indianapolis, and took the train the next afternoon for Detroit, where he had a talk scheduled for the evening of November 13.

Following the short visit, Dreiser wrote to thank May and her family. In response, she invited him to come back for Thanksgiving on November 24. She promised him days of rest, good food, and good times: "We are not telling anyone and you'll just be at home with us—the family. If this wonderful weather continues we could drive to Warsaw on Saturday because Calvert [May's grandson] doesn't work Saturdays." She assumed her motherly role when she wrote that they were just simple folks "but we like you and I need you. I am so opinionated you must take me down." And she wanted to tell him how to be happy and hopeful: "Your life has been so hard my heart aches for you. I want to help you." She closed with "More love than ever. May" (17 Nov. 1938).

However, the November 12–13 visit of 1938 would be the third and final time in their adult lives that Dreiser and his former teacher would meet.

May's Failing Health

On April 23, 1939, May wrote to ask Dreiser if he could stand another of her "blind" letters. At this time, her diabetes was taking a stronger hold: her handwriting was shaky, and she was nearly blind. She thanked him for an article he had sent about America's involvement in World War II: "I think you are just right in what you say about England. But you are wrong on Russia." (Dreiser wanted the U.S. to remain neutral in Britain's affairs—and was at the same time a sympathizer with Russian communism.)



Fig. 3. Four generations of the Calvert-Baker-Craig family taken July 1939. From left: Infant Robert Craig (May's great-grandson); Calvert Craig (May's grandson); May Calvert Baker; and Jessie B. Craig (May's daughter). (Photo courtesy of Robert Craig)

In summer 1939, May was once again visiting her beloved Warsaw/Winona Lake retreat. She wrote in response to a Dreiser letter that she was pleased his portrait was being painted and that she wished to "live to see your picture in the state library" (18 July 1939). She was referring to a portrait of Dreiser that had been commissioned by J. K. Lilly Jr., who had portraits made of authors of books he had collected.¹³

As a proud teacher ever supportive of her former students, May wrote Mr. Lilly on August 30, 1939: "I wish to thank you for having Theodore Dreiser's picture made. I think every Hoosier citizen should be grateful to you for what you are doing. . . . I was his first public school teacher at Warsaw."¹⁴

On this same date, May wrote Dreiser that she had to come home early from Winona Lake because her diabetes had caused a foot infection and she was now too blind to write herself. (Her recent letters were typed for her.) But she was not so ill that she couldn't once again assume her role as teacher. In response to a Dreiser article in the *Rotarian* that she had had read to her three times, she wrote, "I want to say that you missed the greatest point in life—the faith that makes old age a happy time, the assurance

that we are going on to immortality to learn more of our great creator" (30 Aug. 1939).

May repeatedly asked Dreiser to write to her, especially as her infirmities worsened. Living then in California, near Hollywood, Dreiser was busy with screenplays and books. In a scratchy, handwritten note, May wrote, "In spite of blindness I want to write a few words to tell you I am very slowly getting better 7 weeks I have been laid up but unable to do or see and I want a word from you so much. I don't know whether you even read this or not but want to try to get a response from you. Fear you never read my typed letters" (14 Oct. 1939). In another handwritten note a few months later, May pleaded with Dreiser for a letter and offered an update on her health: "I wished for a word from you to me. I have been a shut-in for six months and am first beginning to go out a little. So you see how I need my friends. I am too blind to read and can't see to write decently" (13 March 1940). And more than a year later, she wrote again in her own large handwriting: "I wish to hear from you. Do you realize it is two years since your blind teacher had a personal word from you. Come and talk to me" (21 May 1941).

That was the last known correspondence between the two.

May Calvert Baker died at her daughter's home in Indianapolis on August 3, 1942, a few days after her 80th birthday. One funeral service was held in Indianapolis the morning of August 5, and then another service was held in Warsaw in mid-afternoon, with a minister from the Church of the Brethren conducting services.¹⁵ Burial was at Oakwood Cemetery in the Calvert family plot on a hill overlooking the south shore of Pike Lake.

Upon getting the news of her death, Dreiser sent flowers and condolences to the family. A few weeks later, May's daughter, Jessie Craig, wrote him a thank-you note: "You must know . . . how much your lovely flowers and message meant at the time of my mother's passing. She always treasured each message from you so much, and I feel sure she knows and appreciates your last tribute" (16 Oct. 1942).

Notes

1. The author is grateful for two grants from Indiana University that supported this research project: An Exploration Traveling Fellowship Grant from the New Frontiers in the Arts and Humanities Program and a Grant-in-Aid of Research sponsored by the School of Journalism.

2. The author is indebted to the helpful and cordial staff of the Kosciusko County (Indiana) Historical Society Jail Museum for access to the West Ward School records for the 1884–1885 school year.

3. Indiana did not have a compulsory education law for students aged 7 through 14 until 1897, and then students were required to attend school for only 12 weeks each year (Cotton 371).

4. Dreiser had lifelong problems with spelling. For example, in his 1916 book about his Indiana travels in the summer of 1915, *A Hoosier Holiday*, he spelled May Calvert's first name "Mae." In a later autobiography, *Dawn*, published in 1931—and long after he had much correspondence and two visits with her—he made the correction.

5. Unless otherwise noted, all correspondence between May Calvert Baker and Theodore Dreiser comes from the Theodore Dreiser Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania. The author wishes to thank the Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania for permission to quote from correspondence and is grateful to Nancy M. Shawcross, John Pollock, and the staff of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library for their expert and cordial assistance.

6. Robert Craig (great-grandson of May Calvert Baker), telephone conversation with the author, 30 November 2005.

7. *Directory of the Huntington County Schools, 1918–1919*, Huntington, Indiana.

8. Dreiser's novel *The "Genius"* had been declared obscene by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, and the publisher, John Lane Co., agreed to pull the book from circulation pending a court decision. Fearing problems with postal regulations as well, the publisher recalled all copies from bookstores nationally (Swanberg 245).

9. The actual visit Dreiser made to northern Indiana was June 1919, not 1917.

10. They had known each other for 52 years at the time, not 54.

11. John (Jack) Shoup was a Dreiser seventh-grade classmate in 1884–1885 at the West Ward School in Warsaw.

12. Dreiser had recently addressed a peace conference in Paris, after which he visited Barcelona and observed first hand the devastation of the Spanish Civil War (Swanberg 546).

13. The portrait was painted in 1939 by Boris Chaliapin, a Russian immigrant who was well-known for this ability to work quickly and accurately. He subsequently painted several hundred *Time* magazine covers of various people between the early 1940s and the 1970s. Today, the Dreiser portrait hangs at the top of the stairs on the second floor of Indiana University's Lilly Library.

14. Letter from May Calvert Baker to J. K. Lilly Jr., August 30, 1939. Courtesy The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

15. "Mrs. May Calvert Baker Dies in Indianapolis; Funeral in Warsaw." *Warsaw (Indiana) Daily Union* 5 Aug. 1942: 2.

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Opera Review: *An American Tragedy* at the Metropolitan Opera

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The orchestra's volume rises, and high upon the set's upper story a canoe topples against silver Adirondacks sunlight. While a young woman struggles in the water, her lover cannot—or does not try to—save her.

At stage level, scenery panels shift like sliding doors to expose an enlarged photographic rendering of the actual Herkimer County courthouse. A chorus of townsfolk intones the poor drowned girl's letters from the newspaper; large facsimiles of the letters themselves are represented upon other shifting panels of the multi-tiered set. The drama progresses frenetically, cinematically: the upstate New York mansion, the district attorney, the lover's arrest, worries about tarnished reputations. The set is a deck of cards that can be shuffled and reshuffled. Finally, the mother of the accused, a poor, evangelical missionary, her stark, faded black dress contrasting with the brilliant designs that the society women have purchased in New York City, sings to her pathetic son of sin and righteousness. Her voice, the strongest of all, resonates to the top tier of the opera house. To paraphrase her consolations: *Your suffering is no different than Christ's. You must tell the truth, tell them of the innocence that was in your heart at the moment the canoe tipped.* At her urging, the son, Clyde Griffiths, sinks forlorn to his knees and prays with her in a duet.

Didn't we always know that Theodore Dreiser's masterwork was ripe for adaptation as opera? That a Dreiser narrative contained operatic drama of human foible and urges fatal enough to compete with Puccini? At the least, we knew that the young Dreiser's art had been shaped in part by the American musical stage, for as a young man he had worked on the fringes of that world as an editor and lyricist with his popular-song-composing brother, Paul Dresser. He had placed Carrie Meeber, the heroine of his first novel, into a leggy chorus line, later adding a character who, with seductive

erudition, counseled Carrie to read Balzac and to render her natural sympathy and “melodious voice” “valuable to others” by turning “to the dramatic field” (*Sister Carrie* 485).

Certainly, the potential for dramatic adaptation of Dreiser’s writing has not gone unrecognized. *Sister Carrie*, *Jennie Gerhardt*, *An American Tragedy*, and a handful of short stories have received dramatic treatment on stage or film, especially *An American Tragedy*, with two staged versions, two filmed versions, and an unfiled screen adaptation by Sergei Eisenstein. Learning that *An American Tragedy* was being made into an opera, I was not so much surprised as confirmed. Yes, of course. Nevertheless, knowing that the production had been commissioned by such a prestigious company, one with bountiful creative and financial resources, I felt that seeing the New York Metropolitan Opera was an occasion for much excitement—and further evidence that Dreiser still mattered and that he mattered to artists and to an audience in the heady and showy world of the grand opera house.

Undoubtedly, the more romantic elements of, say, Giacomo Puccini’s *La Bohème* find few equivalents in any of Dreiser’s tales, with the possible exception of *Jennie Gerhardt*. *La Bohème*’s naturalistic setting, its ashcan aesthetic, may find several parallels in Dreiser; however, Puccini invests his lower-class types with a romantic nobility we don’t often find among Dreiser’s characters when *they* are poor—again, excepting Jennie. Love in Dreiser is typically impulsive, obsessive, and sexually needy; it seems directed inward as self-love, or self-preservation, not exactly a basis for structuring romantic narrative.

And yet Dreiser himself breathed the same air of literary and artistic realism that Puccini did, coming of age in the late nineteenth century. In fact, Puccini’s most popular opera in the United States, *La Bohème*, debuted in New York the same year as Dreiser’s first novel, 1900. I saw recently in a *New Yorker* opera review that, since 1900, the Metropolitan has staged *La Bohème* more than any other work, 1,178 times (Ross 84). Dreiser’s realist fiction has been somewhat less persistent with the general reading public. Puccini’s realist style came to be called *verismo*. And while the *verismo* style in Italian opera had declined in popularity by the time of Puccini’s death in 1924, the subjects and settings that movement introduced to opera hardly vanished. Indeed, the notion of staging contemporary life and its problems upon the opera stage continues to inspire composers and librettists. From Prokofiev’s operatic interpretation of Dostoevsky’s *The Gambler* in 1929, to Virgil Thomson giving voice to Susan B. Anthony in 1947, to Philip Glass’s meditations upon Albert Einstein and John Adams’s jour-



Dolora Zajick as Elvira Griffiths and Nathan Gunn as Clyde Griffiths. (Photo courtesy Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera)

nalistic, political operas such as *Nixon in China*, modern life remains a compelling subject for opera's particular blend of collaborative artistic expression. The right moment for an operatic *An American Tragedy* has been here at least since the novel's publication.

Gene Scheer, who wrote the libretto for the Met's *An American Tragedy*, has said that Dreiser's story "cries out for an operatic treatment" ("Working"). Composer Tobias Picker, who was commissioned by the Met in 1997 to create any opera he wanted to, had, from the start, wanted to make this one. "The first thing that came to mind was *An American Tragedy*," Picker explains. "I grew up with it. It was my father's favorite book; Dreiser was his favorite author. He had an autographed copy of the first edition in his library, which I read. And it had the scope, and the bigness of drama and message that I thought was appropriate for this most august of opera houses" (Kors 12).

Moreover, for Picker, *An American Tragedy* remains as politically compelling today as it was in 1925. During a public interview sponsored by the Metropolitan Opera Guild in November of 2005, a few weeks before the opera premiered in early December, Picker referred specifically to Dreiser's confrontation of evangelical Christianity and industry. The "engine of this opera," Picker said, "is American industry." I was intrigued to learn that Picker had failed, at first, to procure the rights to Dreiser's 1925 best seller because someone else had already optioned it to write a musical. When that project didn't succeed, Picker and Sheer halted work on their second choice for a Dreiser opera, *Sister Carrie*. Of that project, too, one might say, *yes—of course!*

So how well does Picker and Sheer's conception of *An American Tragedy* succeed in the form they have given it? Does the Met's production indeed confirm the strong affinity they perceived between Dreiser's sprawling narrative and opera's particular way of telling a story? Finally, does their operatic interpretation of a Dreiser novel demonstrate that Dreiser does indeed matter for our times?

My own answer to the first two questions is mixed. I think that Picker and Sheer, along with dramaturge Francesca Zambello, set designer Adrienne Lobel, choreographer Doug Varone, and the remarkable performing artists, certainly do create, with many elements of their work, a stunning effect based upon Dreiser's art—in the storytelling, in song, dance, and acting, and in the production's appearance—the deck of cards I mentioned above, Lobel's own metaphor for her design concept (Marx). To offer one prominent example, the powerful physicality of the production emphasizes, in an arena that is adaptable to presenting physical drama, something central

to much of Dreiser's writing, something, indeed, that made his writing controversial in its time. The sight of a muscular, shirtless Clyde Griffiths (baritone Nathan Gunn) lying with nightgowned upon Roberta Alden (soprano Patricia Racette) on her small rooming-house bed, while tame for an era of desperate housewives, may nonetheless recall for a modern audience the nonconformity that as early as *Sister Carrie* made Dreiser greatly appealing to some and abhorrent to others.

One could argue that *An American Tragedy*, the opera, even manages to do one or two things better than Dreiser could. It not only deepens the female characters; it also makes women stronger in their physical presence, their movements and expressions, and, not surprisingly, in their voices. Belting out an aria can lend a kind of stature to a person. As noted earlier, I thought, and I know the audience thought, that mezzo soprano Dolora Zajick, who sings the role of Elvira Griffiths, has the strongest voice of the cast. To express admiration for a performance in the middle of an act is the opera aficionado's pleasure, and Zajick's fans thundered their pleasure through the enormous hall. Though she essentially adheres to the role Dreiser gave to Elvira, with that robust voice filling the house, her function as a moral and psychological force upon Clyde, is, to say the least, accentuated.

In the same vein, a baritone voice accentuates Clyde's rakish nature and lends him somewhat more physical presence and volition than possessed by other Clydes we have known. Whatever sympathy a reader or opera spectator feels for Clyde Griffiths has to come in the wake of his deceptions and overall shallowness. I found Gunn's projection of confidence, manifested in body and movement as well as in his large, sonorous voice, an extremely compelling counterpoint to the pathos of his social circumstances. Clyde becomes both deeper as a human being and more dangerous as an opportunist. (This Clyde never does sing the word that reveals his shallowness in the novel—"Gee.")

Watching this opera, I could not help but compare it to the 1951 film adaptation, *A Place in the Sun*. Although Gunn actually resembles Montgomery Clift, he plays and sings a far more imposing Clyde than Clift's George Eastman, even though Clift, in my view, quite eerily embodies the novel's Clyde. Similarly, one finds a satisfying roundness in the character of Patricia Racette's Roberta Alden while she is in her rooming house bed with Clyde or while she sings the texts of Grace Brown's letters to Chester Gillette when seated in a rocking chair against panels of a photographed rural American landscape—a roundness missing from Shelly Winters's shriller depiction in the film, a depiction that, nevertheless, Dreiser himself

might have approved. Picker and Scheer even invent a scene in which a strong and sympathetic Roberta confronts Clyde after a church service he has attended with Sondra Finchley's family. Indeed, Picker confers both strength and distinction upon his Roberta by giving her the opera's soprano role.

As film director George Stevens had tried to do despite the pressures of McCarthyism in 1951, Picker, Sheer, and the rest of this *American Tragedy*'s creators have tried to tell, and in various ways succeeded at telling, a story that is implicitly critical of certain constants and certain myths of American cultural life. In the rocking chair scene referred to above, Roberta Alden has had to move from her rural home as a girl to an industrial city where she knows not a soul to work for long hours and low pay folding cloth in a factory. She returns home pregnant and anxious. Picker's moving aria, Racette's major solo in the production, framed by Lobel's pastoral set, directs the audience to feel the character's tenuous nostalgia for a place that can no longer offer her any real comfort. The audience cannot help but think that the rural image behind Roberta's pretty rocker, though appealing, is only a photograph, visible but nonetheless one dimensional. The family and homestead can no longer exist for her or for any other girl compelled by poverty, by strictures governing the lives of women, as well as by curiosity and desire, to leave home. In most if not all respects, scenes such as this one do indeed tell the same story of America that Dreiser himself told but with the added dimensions of theater.

Before *An American Tragedy*, Picker had composed operas with Scheer based upon Judith Rossner's 1980 novel *Emmeline* (1996), also about a girl forced by circumstances to work in a factory, and *Thérèse Raquin* (2001), based on Emile Zola's 1868 tale of adultery and revenge. As a composer of an opera of naturalism, Picker's credentials are sterling. At the public interview that I attended in November, both Picker and Francesca Zambello, the opera's dramaturge, or director, who had also worked on *Emmeline* and *Thérèse Raquin*, seemed slightly defensive about the romanticism of Picker's score for *An American Tragedy*. Curiously, they accounted for their neo-romanticism as an expression of the opera's distinctly American character. They wished to tell the audience on hand for the interview that Picker was not *as* modern in his musical style as were his American teachers Milton Babbitt (at Julliard) and Eliot Carter (at Princeton). Picker said his opera was American in that it was melodic, with more arias, duets, trios, and ensembles than he had ever before written for an opera. He wanted his audience "to have an emotional experience." Zambello was excited to have a project to work on that was, she said, so distinctly American—"an Ameri-

can opera in the context of America striving to find its voice on the American stage.”

Both explicitly and implicitly, Picker and company suggest that their neo-romantic musical idiom is somehow more American than sounds and scenes associated with other contemporary composers. In one sense, it may be. That is, the opera is reminiscent of that most American of musical types, the popular stage musical. Apart from the narrative’s drama, the choreography, the impressive mechanics of the sets, and the color and sensuality of the production made me wish that the failed effort to make a stage musical out of *An American Tragedy* had succeeded, if only for the sake of comparison. To one scene, a duet of seduction acted and sung by Clyde and Hortense Briggs (Anna Christy), the opera’s choreographer, Doug Varone, has certainly lent the feel of that other musical genre. Above stage is a hotel room where the poor girl teases the poor boy in a sexualized dance—though the baritone and well proportioned boy is himself a physical force in this dance, more *Oklahoma*’s Curly than Dreiser’s more insecure Clyde Griffiths. Below, a large chorus of wealthy businessmen, top-hatted, sipping cognac, smoking cigars—a cloud of smoke rises above them—resoundingly toast Mr. Samuel Griffiths of Lycurgus (Kim Begley), maker of “the best damned shirt collars in America.” The music *sounds* operatic enough, but the scene looks and moves as if it could be playing Broadway. (These simultaneous dances take place in a Chicago hotel, incidentally. The Kansas City and Chicago portions of the story have been conflated, and many of Clyde’s early pressures—Asa, Esta, Ratterer, the car accident—have been elided.)

Picker attempts to translate into music “what Dreiser wanted to say about America” by giving each of the opera’s three primary figures a leitmotif, expressed through an aria that found its inspiration in the novel’s details but goes “beyond the source material” (Marx). The first such leitmotif is sung by Clyde, when, arriving in Lycurgus, he marvels at his cousin Gilbert’s (tenor William Burden’s) gleaming Model T Ford—an actual car rolled out onto the stage. The second is sung by Sondra, statuesque mezzo Susan Graham, making her entrance after a trip to New York City in a bright, turquoise blue period costume: “New York has changed me . . . its romance, its courage, energy.” Finally, Roberta Alden’s defining aria comes in the second act when she has returned to her family’s farmstead and sings the actual texts of Grace Brown’s letters. I would not argue that these arias fail to express recognizable versions of desire for American success and happiness, or even that they fail to reflect aspects of that desire that also inspired Theodore Dreiser. I would argue, however, that the shape and look

and sound of moments such as these, along with what the opera does not show us, reveal predilections to remain on the surface of the source material.

I must confess that my untrained ear found the opera's musical style somewhat nondescript. It is *not* modern. But neither does it seem particularly out of its time by being recognizably romantic. In a feature written for *The New York Times* on the eve of the opera's opening, Allan Kozin noted the performers' opinions that Picker's "vocal writing is easy on the ear" while "its technical challenges are ample. Mr. Picker's use of vernacular American speech rhythms creates metrically unpredictable lines, said [Susan] Graham, and her arias include some daunting leaps." In retrospect, sections that I tended to hear as *recitative* may instead have been attempts to echo vernacular American speech rhythms. I would have had to listen to the opera more than once to discern those. In his *New York Times* review of December 5, Anthony Tommasini offers a perspective on one scene that seems to characterize several. "Though lushly lyrical and tinged with pungent chromatic harmonies," Tommasini writes, the music "seems beholden to the dramatic moment, not inspired on its own terms." Here, from Tommasini's review, is a more generalized assessment of Picker's score:

Those wary of contemporary music will find Mr. Picker's Neo-Romantic idiom much easier on the ears than, say, that garish shocker Shostakovich's "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk." While John Adams (in "Doctor Atomic"), Thomas Adès (in "The Tempest") and Poul Ruders (in "The Handmaid's Tale") have pushed at the boundaries of the genre, Mr. Picker hews to melodramatic and operatic conventions. Yet he does so with undeniable skill.

Tommasini especially praises Picker and Scheer's virtuosity as dramatists, and I agree that this *American Tragedy* is highly theatrical. In a program note, Gene Scheer tells us that the librettist's job is "to create moments that demand to be sung":

The words clearly matter, but crafting what is happening in each moment is what makes an opera "sing," both literally and figuratively. The idea of measuring the room for the wedding bed in the opening of *The Marriage of Figaro* or the wonderfully romantic way in *La Bohème* in which Rodolfo finds the key and furtively slips it into his pocket so that he might ultimately touch Mimi's hand in the darkness—moments like these are not simply dramatic, they are operatic. In the scenario I wrote for Tobias, I tried to create moments that were similarly operatic. ("Note" 10)

Given the considerable innovation and originality in other operas that Tommasini mentions, Scheer's use of the term "operatic" would seem to beg interrogation. But Scheer himself, echoing his collaborators, sketches in the genealogy: Mozart—Puccini—Picker. Of course, he does so with a particular point of reference: the scenario, the opera's scenes, its *moments*. And while some of the opera's more conventional romance is undoubtedly operatic in Scheer's sense of the term, a few of the opera's scenes are rather more unconventional. Moments that move the spectator off familiar ground take place in the courtroom. For instance, Clyde sings part of his testimony while standing inside a wobbling canoe, an arresting image that almost becomes parody. In terms of what is or is not operatic, I found something intriguing about courtroom testimony being sung, especially when the veracity of witnesses and lawyers is so questionable. Nevertheless, absent any nobility, Clyde's selective recollections in his own defense—the wobbling canoe notwithstanding—as well as the prosecuting attorney's histrionic and conveniently fictitious account of what happened out on the lake, take us back to an opera of the sordid that, I suppose, made Italian *verismo* so original for its time. The jury-as-chorus's brutal condemnation as they shout GUILTY AS CHARGED is a piece of powerful operatic drama. It made me wish I had seen what Picker had done with the rather more animalistic behaviors of *Thérèse Raquin*.

Along with scenes of love and desire among Clyde and his two women, there is something more recognizably operatic in the correspondences Picker and Scheer make between the gospel drone of Clyde's early days on the Kansas City streets and the opera's finale when Clyde sings to "Lord Jesus" to "give me life." The performer who plays the young and innocent Clyde at the opera's opening (Graham Phillips) steps out of the shadows to lead the condemned man up long, iron (may I say *celestial*?) stairs to an oversized electric chair. Perhaps opera's particular cultural authority allows it to run unabashedly with the story's moral elements, which in other media, such as film, would have greater potential to become either melodrama or irony. Indeed, *An American Tragedy*'s collaborators seem to have taken their moral authority seriously.

But the contrast between these second act sequences, the trial and the execution, in both their staging and their music, finally demonstrates that this opera may be more at home in the metaphorical realm of the spirit than it can be in the grittier realm of social matters. Metaphorically heightening the electrocution of a human being to present it as redemptive within a Christian context may be fine stuff for an operatic finale. But the iconography of a *dead man walking* up industrial stairs to an enormous chair that

will send electricity coursing through his body raises a few sticky issues for contemporary spectators. Are Picker and Scheer for it or against it? It is arguable, I think, that Dreiser never fully exposes his own ethics of capital punishment. At the least, Clyde's execution became for Dreiser the opportunity for a dramatic climax that his other novels never afforded him. But I do not read the novel's rushing finale as, *per se*, a moral critique of execution, though I am unfamiliar with the politics of capital punishment during the 1920s. I do know that in the early 21st century the artistic representation of a high-tech execution (as opposed to a more conventionally romantic hanging or shooting) cannot help but be charged, as it were, with significance. In that respect, the opera's creative team strikes me as naïve.

Perhaps every generation (or at least every other) will have its *American Tragedy*. Given themes like capital punishment, abortion, or the gap between wealth and poverty, the book hardly seems dated. As for sex itself, the opera makes it look pretty satisfying. There's none of the fumbling from the novel here. Hortense Briggs is coy and graceful. Clyde, bare-chested above Roberta's mattress, apparently seems knowledgeable enough as a lover. This is grown up, television sex. As for the novel's sequence of Clyde and "Bert" going to visit Dr. Glenn, the opera's makers may have chosen wisely not to touch that one. I am not questioning the artistic decision to avoid a scene in the office of an abortionist; such a scene might not have satisfied Scheer's search for the ideal operatic moment. Still, the opera does have a problem with some of the social issues it does raise. It tends to flatten them. This is what I meant earlier when I said that certain artistic choices made here treat the source material superficially.

We should have no trouble imagining Paramount's anxiety in 1951 about taking on Dreiser's anti-capitalism as it set out to film *A Place in the Sun*, what with a few memories of Eisenstein's script still lurking about. Recasting the story to be set in post-war America was itself a bold move for 1951. According to Lawrence Hussman, director George Stevens's "original plan to make a more authentic adaptation of *An American Tragedy* was derailed by fear of trouble from the House Un-American Activities Committee, then in the full flush of its power" (2). We may sincerely wonder whether the political climate of the United States in the Bush years elicits anxieties about speaking truth to power, especially the power that emanates from corporate capitalism and protestant fundamentalism. Picker did say that he was intrigued by Dreiser's prescience in having noted the confluence of these forces. Nevertheless, his opera brightens up and, yes, romanticizes its contemporary reference points.

In speaking and writing *about* their opera, Picker, Scheer, and Zambello

direct the audience to read representations of wealth, industry, and evangelical Christianity as relevant to contemporary discourse. But the opera makes its audience work hard to read its rhetoric as social criticism comparable to Dreiser's. For example, there is a cheerful scene above stage in which a group of women sing and fold cloth in the Griffiths' collar factory while Cousin Gilbert escorts Clyde through, cautioning him to make "no mistakes, no mistakes" and to keep his hands off the ladies. The scene goes dark then as, below stage, Gilbert's lovely maroon Model T is rolled out in anticipation of Clyde's aria on the American automobile. Within this juxtaposition of scenes, the Model T clearly elicits the lion's share of exclamations on the part of the audience, underscoring their comprehension of Clyde's nascent worship of bright American things. The stark imagery that Dreiser gives us of poor, lonely, vulnerable women like Roberta who have left rural homes to work for pennies a day in Gilbert's father's steaming factory is entirely unrealized by the working women's song and choreography. Think *West Side Story's* treatment of gang warfare.

More importantly, given this opera's cinematic pacing, any chance of viewing the women as exploited is quickly subsumed by below-stage opulence, the car and then the architecture and attire of the Griffiths and their social set. That dissolve of work to leisure, want to wealth, dullness to beauty is a microcosm of the opera's general iconographic preference. The image of Roberta in her antique rocker before that lovely pastoral backdrop cannot help but make the spectator wonder why she ever left home. The grim poverty and oppression of life back home that Dreiser so memorably represents in both fiction and memoir here gets turned into rustic wallpaper.

Possibly that is the very point. Possibly the entire production externalizes Clyde Griffiths's internal iconography, his desire and then his desperation to make dullness and want dissolve. That reading of the opera is certainly possible. Nevertheless, I was ultimately left wondering whether class differences, industrial exploitation, and the consumer envy that supports it all could ever be plausibly questioned within the opulent surroundings of this most august of opera houses, with staging that seems to be playing to the comfort of the comfortable. Can contemporary opera professing to have been made in the romantic tradition of *verismo* also be relevant to real world struggles? Or can it merely offer its contemporary spectator yet another escape, this time in the form of airbrushed ashcan imagery? Finally, the Dreiser that would matter to the 21st century opera audience is the first-rate documentarian of affluence and its trappings. As for the Dreiser who explored the mechanisms of wealth and of the American dream's false and tragic operations, that Dreiser is underserved by this interpretation of his great novel.

An American Tragedy, at the Metropolitan Opera House, December 5, 2005 through December 28, 2005. Music by Tobias Picker, libretto by Gene Scheer, based on the novel by Theodore Dreiser; conductor, James Conlon; production by Francesca Zambello; sets by Adrienne Lobel; costumes by Dunya Ramicova; lighting by James F. Ingalls; choreography by Doug Varone.

Performers: Patricia Racette (Roberta Alden), Susan Graham (Sondra Finchley), Jennifer Larmore (Elizabeth Griffiths), Dolora Zajick (Elvira Griffiths), William Burden (Gilbert Griffiths), Kim Begley (Samuel Griffiths), Nathan Gunn (Clyde Griffiths), Graham Phillips (Young Clyde) and Richard Bernstein (Orville Mason).

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Reviews

Dreiser's "Other Self": The Life of Arthur Henry, by Maggie Walker and Mark Walker. McKinleyville, CA: Fithian Press, 2005. x + 258 pp. Paper, \$17.95.

"Surely there are no better friends than we are," Theodore Dreiser wrote to Arthur Henry in July 1900, expressing heartfelt sentiments in his characteristically clumsy and somewhat verbose style. "You are to me my other self, a very excellent Dreiser, minus some of my defects, plus many laughable errors which I would not have. If I could not be what I am, I would be you." Thus the apt title of this highly readable biography, written in a dispassionate tone and exhibiting scrupulous scholarship, by Henry's granddaughter Maggie Walker, a former journalist, and her husband and coauthor Mark Walker, an editor and freelance writer. Maggie Walker is the daughter of Dorothy Henry Van Auken, who was the only child of Arthur Henry and his first wife Maude Wood Henry. Benefiting from the authors' reportorial and literary talents, as well as invaluable knowledge of intimate family details, *Dreiser's "Other Self"* is a book which, it seems, had to be written by the Walkers. Nature abhors a vacuum, and American literary history (and, by extension, Dreiser scholarship) has been well served by the authors' collaboration on this book. This is the first biography of Henry, about whom there has been scant biographical and almost no critical material available other than the accounts of his relationship with Dreiser (most of which recycle essentially the same anecdotes and information) available in Dreiser biographies and studies focusing on the composition of *Sister Carrie*.

The friendship and intimacy of Henry and Dreiser was actually of brief duration, lasting from 1894, when they first met in Toledo, Ohio, to about a decade later, when the relationship cooled and essentially died in the aftermath of the publication of Henry's memoir *An Island Cabin* (which contained an unflattering portrait of Dreiser, thinly disguised by a pseudonym).

Thanks to Dreiser scholars, highlights of the friendship and literary collaboration of the two are well known: their meeting in Ohio when Henry,

then city editor at the *Toledo Blade*, hired Dreiser to cover a trolley strike; the summer they spent together (with their wives) at Arthur and Maude Henry's summer home in Maumee, Ohio, in 1899, where Dreiser, at Henry's urging, wrote his first story, "The Shining Slave Makers" (later published as "McEwen of the Shining Slave Makers") and perhaps began *Sister Carrie*; the role played by Henry in the gestation, writing, and publication of *Sister Carrie* (Henry's importance as mentor, editor, and, in effect, literary agent in Dreiser's dealings with the novel's publisher, Doubleday, Page and Company, cannot be underestimated); the period during the early 1900's when Henry and Dreiser lived together briefly and collaborated as freelance magazine writers to such an extent that it is sometimes difficult to determine authorship. The Walkers contend that, with the exception of Richard Lingeman, "Dreiser's biographers have only slightly acknowledged Henry's role in the making of the great American novelist."

Although the details of this period are already well known, the Walkers cite rare and previously inaccessible passages in Henry's writings containing vivid descriptions of Dreiser, specifically Henry's impressions upon first meeting Dreiser—recorded in Henry's unpublished novel *Roger Allen*—and his description of the scene at Howley, Haviland, and Company (the publishers of *Ev'ry Month*) when both Dreiser and his brother Paul were present.

The relationship between Henry and Dreiser was truly what the Walkers call an "intellectual love affair." The unraveling of the friendship was perhaps inevitable, given its intensity and Dreiser's idealization of Henry, his alter ego. It was at around this time that Henry became romantically involved with Anna Mallon, who would become Henry's second wife (and who is the prototype of Rona Murtha in Dreiser's *A Gallery of Women*). Anna Mallon ran a typing agency in New York that Dreiser and later Henry patronized. Her financial support enabled Henry to purchase the "island cabin" and later a house in the Catskills region, which is the setting of Henry's memoir *The House in the Woods*. It is clear that tensions between Dreiser and Mallon contributed to the deterioration of the Henry-Dreiser relationship.

Other than Dreiser's cruel and disparaging portrayal of Henry and their friendship in *A Gallery of Women*, little has hitherto been known about Henry and Mallon's relationship. The authors make use of an invaluable biographical source, Anna Mallon Henry's letters to Delia Farrell Seifferth, which were discovered by Donald Oakes, editor of a recent (2000) edition of Henry's *The House in the Woods*. In her afterword, Maggie Walker acknowledges indebtedness to Oakes's discovery but asserts that Oakes mis-

represents details of Henry's life in his afterword to the reprint edition of Henry's book.

The focus of my review thus far has been Henry's relationship with Dreiser. But the biography, of course, is Henry's. It was obviously a labor of love that has gleaned details from diverse sources such as Henry's memoirs (*An Island Cabin*, *The House in the Woods*, and *Lodgings in Town*); a biography, written by Henry's sister, of his mother, Sarepta Myrenda Irish Henry, a prolific author and leader in the temperance movement; Sarepta Henry's own works; anecdotal material about the Chicago newspaper scene and its luminaries in the 1890s, when both Henry and Dreiser did journalistic apprenticeships there; and Henry's unpublished autobiographical novel, from which the authors have teased details about Henry's youth. Knowledge of the whereabouts of Henry's family during the early years and his education, early travels, and youthful employments is often lacking. But the authors have pulled back the curtain a little, discovering, for example, that Henry made a trip to New York City long before it has been known that he did.

The authors' speculations about Henry's whimsical, fanciful, and otherworldly temperament are illuminating. They note the importance of his mother in his emotional development, which is understandable, given that his father, James Henry, a Civil War veteran, died when Henry was three and a half years old. But this fact alone does not account for peculiarities of Henry's upbringing. He was often separated from his mother (who supported the family as an author and later lecturer and was often traveling) and sometimes from his siblings, living for a while as a boarder on a farm, a memorable experience described in *Roger Allen*. In adulthood, the authors note, Henry tended to be overly dependent on women and unrealistic or indifferent in the pursuit of material goals. His philosophy of life was summed up in an essay entitled "The Doctrine of Happiness," published by Dreiser in *Ev'ry Month*. The authors' speculations about Henry's sex life are provocative and persuasive. To put it crudely, they suggest that Henry (in marked contrast to Dreiser) was undersexed. "The major defect in his character," they conclude, "lay in his aversion to and fear of the physical act of love."

A chapter is devoted to *Nicholas Blood, Candidate*, an early (1890) novel by Henry that was known by hardly anyone other than Henry himself to have been written by Henry until Dreiser scholar Ellen Moers discovered the fact of Henry's authorship and published it in an article in *The Dreiser Newsletter* ("A 'New' First Novel by Arthur Henry," *Dreiser Newsletter* 4 [1973]: 7-9). Echoing noxious sentiments which were prevalent at the time

in the locale where it is set (to what extent they reflected Henry's own views is problematic), the novel, which was hastily written and is poorly constructed, portrays Southern blacks in the Reconstruction Era as subhuman brutes who are a menace to whites and civilized society. Realizing that the book would be distasteful to his liberal friends, Henry subsequently took "great pains to hide this first novel from the world," the authors note. They are inclined to agree with Ellen Moers's suggestion that the novel, written by Henry at age twenty while on a trip south with his brother Alfred, was perhaps written at the behest of some local political interest, and they agree with Dreiser biographer Richard Lingeman that the book was "probably a youthful indiscretion."

Mention should be made of the excellent photographs in this biography, many of them from the authors' private collection. My favorites are a stunning photo of Henry's mother as a young woman and a photo of Henry and his third wife, the playwright Clare Kummer, taken on a beach in Santa Monica, California, when Henry was in his sixties. Henry's smiling, slightly upturned face radiates warmth and serenity.

This biography inspired me to read Arthur Henry's memoirs and fiction, and I'm glad it did. Henry is a fascinating figure in his own right; his story is a compelling one, and he shouldn't be totally forgotten as an author. His novel *A Princess of Arcady* is a bit fanciful for today's tastes, but it has a unique charm, and his novel *The Unwritten Law* not only tells a gripping and moving story that would do Frank Norris credit but also provides a wonderful peep at life in a German immigrant family and among various classes in turn-of-the-nineteenth-century Brooklyn and well-described Manhattan locales such as Washington Square. His memoirs, which constitute a trilogy, hold up very well. They are at the same time charming period pieces with a wealth of finely realized descriptive detail and Thoreauvian musings.

No Dreiserian should neglect to acquire this book.

— Roger W. Smith

Mencken: The American Iconoclast, by Marion Elizabeth Rodgers. NY: Oxford University Press, 2005. ix + 662 pp. Cloth, \$35.00.

Rodgers's book is the third new Mencken biography to appear since the posthumous publication of Mencken's *Diary* (1989), *My Life as Author and Editor* (1993), and *Thirty-five Years of Newspaper Work* (1994). Mencken's diary, kept from 1930–48, and both reflections on his career and contempo-

raries, written in the 1940s, were so candid that they could not be made public until 25 to 35 years after his death in 1956. Mencken's earlier biographers, Ernest Boyd (1925), Isaac Goldberg (1925), Edgar Kemler (1950), and William Manchester (1950), had the advantage of knowing their subject personally; Carl Bode (1969) still had the opportunity to interview numerous surviving contemporaries. However, Mencken's more recent biographers, Fred Hobson (1994), Terry Teachout (2002), and now Rodgers, have had the benefit of much information that Mencken had withheld from his contemporaries. Hobson, a southern liberal academic scholar who had already published the definitive *Serpent in Eden: H. L. Mencken and the South* in 1974, presents a comprehensive biography of a Mencken, who, even in light of his previously unpublished letters, diary, and autobiographical works, remains "elusive." Teachout, a music and literary critic for the monthly magazine *Commentary* and editor of *A Second Mencken Chrestomathy* (1994), presents "a partial portrait" of a Mencken whose skepticism was "so extreme as to issue in philosophical incoherence" and whose "liberating force" was "less a function of his particular convictions than his style."

Rodgers, a graduate of Goucher College, where Mencken's wife Sara Haardt had studied and taught, and editor of *Mencken and Sara: A Life in Letters* (1987) and *The Impossible H. L. Mencken: A Selection of His Best Newspaper Stories* (1991), presents not just another comprehensive biography, but one that adds significant new details from new contemporary sources (e.g., Margaret Lappin's memoirs of her eight years during the 1920s as Mencken's first personal secretary) concerning Mencken's family and home life, his daily routine, his relationships with various women (earning him the sobriquet "the German Valentino"), and his career as a newspaper man, from his apprenticeship years with the Baltimore *Herald* and editorship of the *Evening Sun* in 1938, to his decade-long negotiations with the American Newspaper Guild and reporting at the 1948 presidential conventions. Rodgers also evokes Mencken's inner life, characterizes contemporaries, describes locations, reports weather conditions (to which Mencken's moods were often related), and fleshes out events such as the Great Baltimore Fire of 1904 in greater and more vivid detail than do either Teachout or Hobson. Rodgers's more descriptive text is further reinforced by 92 photographs, which are distributed throughout her book, in contrast to Hobson and Teachout, who provide in the middle of their books only 32 and 11 photographs, respectively.

Teachout's biography introduces Mencken in "permanent opposition" but already in decline in the 1930s, rapidly losing influence in his violent

opposition to Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal, in his apparent insensitivity to the Depression, and in his bewildering nonchalance regarding the growing menace of Hitler and Nazi Germany. Both Hobson and Teachout tend to attribute Mencken's vehement criticism of Roosevelt to personal revenge following the Gridiron Dinner on December 8, 1934, when the president humiliated Mencken in front of his fellow journalists by using Mencken's scathing essay on "Journalism in America" (in the 1927 *Prejudices: Sixth Series*) in response to humorous criticism from Mencken and the press that evening. Rodgers argues persuasively, however, that "Mencken's motivation went far beyond a single simple slight at a dinner," that "to Mencken, the defender of liberty, FDR's manipulation of the press and later his censorship policies were far more significant."

Rodgers introduces Mencken at the height of his career in 1926, when Walter Lippmann observed in the *Saturday Review of Literature* that Mencken was "the most powerful personal influence on this whole generation of educated people" following his reporting on the Scopes Trial the previous year and his victory in Boston, where the New England Watch & Ward Society had attempted to have the April 1926 issue of *The American Mercury* banned because it contained an "obscene" short story by Herbert Asbury entitled "Hatrack." This signature event serves as the prologue to Rodgers's biography and signals what Rodgers considers, in spite of all the paradoxes and contradictions in the "elusive" (Hobson) or "skeptical" (Teachout) Mencken, to be the central theme of Mencken's extraordinarily prolific work, namely, his lifelong and often courageous defense of individual liberty, civil rights, and freedom of thought, speech, and the press against Puritanism, Prohibition, and all forms of censorship, fraud, and hypocrisy.

Rodgers traces this theme from Mencken's "Free Lance" column (1911–15) in the *Evening Sun*, which represents "a turning point" in his career, when he recognized that "he was conducting a never-ending campaign against the moralists." Dedicated, as Mencken put it, to "stirring up the animals," the "Free Lance" column earned Mencken the sobriquet "The Bad Boy of Baltimore" and served as "the blueprint for many of his future books." When he vehemently contested British and Allied propaganda and censorship in WWI, Mencken's column was canceled in October 1915. Rodgers argues that his experience of censorship and superpatriotic hostility towards Germans and German-Americans sensitized him for the rest of his life not only to freedom of speech and the press but also to civil rights and racial issues. Hobson and Teachout touch only on the silencing of Mencken during WWI, Mencken's protest "action" against censorship of Theodore

Dreiser's novel *The "Genius"* in 1916, and the Boston "Hatrack" case in 1926. Rodgers adds nothing new concerning Mencken and Dreiser (though, unlike Hobson or Teachout, Rodgers quotes what Mencken wrote to Dreiser's wife Helen following Dreiser's death in 1945: "He was a man of large originality, of profound feeling, and of unshakeable courage. All of us who write are better off because he lived, worked and hoped"). But she does flesh out Mencken's experiences during the war and in the "Hatrack" controversy, as well as during the FDR Administration and WWII.

Both the Hobson and Teachout biographies discuss Mencken's alleged anti-Semitism and racial prejudices versus his personal relations with Jews and African-Americans, but not Mencken's persistent promotion of civil rights. Both make passing reference to Mencken's last piece in the *Evening Sun* (November 9, 1948) calling for desegregation of Baltimore's public tennis courts, and Teachout addresses his crusade against lynching, but only Rodgers discusses—in one of the high points of her biography—Mencken's courageous attack on "The Eastern Shore Kultur." This 1931 *Evening Sun* column, accompanied by Edmund Duffy's Pulitzer-Prize-winning cartoon "Maryland, My Maryland," excoriated Marylanders upon the lynching of an African-American in Salisbury, Maryland. When the General Assembly of Maryland met to pass a joint resolution expressing sorrow over Mencken's death in 1956, several Eastern Shore senators harangued against the resolution (omitting reference to the events of 1931) on the grounds that he had once characterized the Shore's residents as "barbarians" with "ignorant and ignoble minds." Mencken would not have cared about a unanimous vote on the resolution, for he had always believed in a free press and in "stirring up the animals." For Rodgers, Mencken's "greatest contribution"—"beyond his brilliant writing style"—"was his courage to write what he thought."

—Frederick Betz, Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Evolution and "the Sex Problem": American Narratives during the Eclipse of Darwinism, by Bert Bender. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2004. xvi + 389 pp. Cloth, \$59.95.

In *Evolution and "the Sex Problem": American Narratives during the Eclipse of Darwinism*, Bert Bender discusses the importance of biological theories of sexual selection in 20th century American writing and the resistance to Darwinism among the New Critics and the postmodernists alike. As Bender notes, American writers of the era began their journeys—in some cases, both literary and physical—with more than a limited under-

standing and conception of Darwinian thought. Indeed, the novelists he examines appear to have had, at the very least, a passing familiarity with Darwin's *Origin of Species* and his later works on sexual selection, *The Descent of Man* and *Selection in Relation to Sex*. For Bender, the novelists during the literary critical "eclipse of Darwinism" were responding not only to Darwinian or anti-Darwinian theories but also to the earlier courtship novels of the realists Howells and James.

Bender divides his study of "the sex problem" into twelve chapters, beginning with Frank Norris and ending with the later work of Ernest Hemingway. Within the remaining ten chapters, Bender addresses sexual selection in such authors as Crane, London, Dreiser, Stein, Cather, Anderson, Fitzgerald, Calverton, and Steinbeck. The two longest chapters—those on the Harlem Renaissance and on Jack London—have greater length because in the first Bender discusses five novelists (DuBois, Fauset, Larsen, McKay, and Fisher) and in the second he treats London's exploration of the sex problem as "the most informed and comprehensive in American fiction."

Although the chapter devoted to Dreiser is relatively short, the scant 19 pages, defended on the grounds that other scholars have addressed Dreiser's interest in science, Bender does relate four works by Dreiser to Darwinian thought: *Sister Carrie*, *The Financier*, *The Titan*, and *The Stoic*. According to Bender, major Dreiserians (specifically Ellen Moers, Louis J. Zanine, Robert H. Elias, and Donald Pizer) ignore Dreiser's debt to Darwin's theory of sexual selection and thus limit our understanding his presentation of love and, consequently, of his relationship to other realists and naturalists. Bender also criticizes Moers and others for failing to plumb the depth of Darwinian and Freudian influences on Dreiser's works. But perhaps the most crucial point Bender makes is that the key to understanding Dreiser lies not in his embrace of Darwinian thought but rather in his intellectual kinship with post-Darwinian writers such as Haeckel and his *The Riddle of the Universe*.

In his discussion of *Sister Carrie*, Bender focuses on Carrie's serial selection of suitors Drouet, Hurstwood, and Ames, who represent logical progressions in the natural selection process. Drouet is the logical first step, and the stronger, more advanced Hurstwood the logical choice in the Darwinian courtship contest. Finally, the aloof Ames stirs emotion in Carrie but is unable to make a connection with her. Bender emphasizes the growth Carrie attains from the sexual selection process and concludes his by contrasting the novel with *The Awakening*, in which, Bender asserts, Chopin focuses more on motherhood and the power of sexual desire than does Dreiser. Bender argues that, while *Sister Carrie* ends on an uncertain note,

Carrie is at least looking out of a window, suggesting that Ames offers her a sense of direction. *Sister Carrie* thus naturalistically exalts human sexual selection over the more etherealized “courtship” valorized by the Realists as the key to the survival of the individual human organism, if not the species.

Bender’s juxtaposition of *Sister Carrie* and the Cowperwood trilogy emphasizes the inherent differences between Dreiser’s portraits of female sexual desire and male sexual desire. Illustrative of male desire is Frank Cowperwood, Dreiser’s financier who exudes sexual passion. Bender asserts that all too often Dreiserians focus on the sexual and aesthetic duality of human desire in Dreiser’s works, when, he argues, Dreiser collapses the two concepts into one trait: the “life force” unifying strength and beauty. According to Bender, Dreiser’s focus on Cowperwood’s sexual nature underscores his relationship with both Darwin and Haeckel during the years of the eclipse of Darwinism.

In his treatment of Cowperwood, Bender explores—in detail—Cowperwood’s relationship to other literary financiers, notably those in the writings of Harold Frederic and Frank Norris. Bender finds in Dreiser a more adept handling of his hero’s unrestrained sexuality than is found in Frederic or Norris, largely because Dreiser’s drawing heavily on Freud makes him better able to explore his character’s unconscious sexual desires. Bender’s is a fascinating argument, one that stresses the importance of sexual selection and evolution in Dreiser’s work and that of his contemporaries.

—Chris L. Massey, Wright State University

Chicago Dreaming: Midwesterners and the City, 1871–1919, by Timothy B. Spears. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. xxiii + 322 pp. Cloth, \$50.00. Paper, \$20.00.

Spears’s book is a cultural study of Chicago’s short-lived Renaissance in the years succeeding the fire and preceding the flight of much of the city’s artistic and intellectual capital to other destinations, usually New York. Drawing upon archives at the Newberry Library, Spears presents an impressive array of materials culled from literary and nonliterary sources. Writers and non-writers such as George Ade, John and Frances Glessner, Jane Addams, Floyd Dell, Willa Cather, Richard Wright, and Sherwood Anderson receive individual attention, yet the book also delineates connections between members of this small, close-knit community of progressive thinkers and early modernists. Dreiser, rather than being discussed at length, is treated instead as a hovering presence whose *Sister Carrie* serves as the archetypal expression of the period’s *zeitgeist*. What makes Spears’s contribu-

tion to studies of the Chicago Renaissance distinctive is his emphasis upon hinterland migrants—refugees from small Midwestern towns who were magnetically attracted, as Carrie was, to the new metropolis. Emphasizing their homogeneity (most were white, native born, and middle class), Spears treats them as an ethnic group in their own right, with commonly held attitudes and aspirations.

Chicago's proverbially rapid growth affected these newcomers, Spears says, by encouraging them to regard their own identities as works in progress. More so than for other American cities, rebuilt Chicago was a concrete expression of the idea of fluidity, of margins constantly shifting and borders being redrawn, so that hinterland migrants who moved there felt encouraged to unleash long-suppressed impulses. "By constructing the terms of urban modernity around the prospective and retrospective desires of hinterland migrants," Spears says, "and by linking the city's unfinished status to the identities of its provincial citizens, Chicago's writers helped to loosen the categories of 'rural' and 'urban' and expand the discourse of spatial and economic mobility." Here the operative word is "desires," that is, unarticulated yearnings such as those which motivate the fictional Carrie Meeber early in Dreiser's novel, when she first meets the predatory Charles Drouet, and later, when, as "Carrie Madenda," she is shown still rocking restlessly in front of her window despite having achieved success upon the stage. Certainly sexuality is one of desire's facets, but so are ambition and nostalgia. Spears argues convincingly for an awareness of nostalgia's influence in shaping the artistic productions of newspaper columnist Ade and cartoonist John T. McCutcheon, who, during all the time they lived and worked in Chicago, never ceased yearning for their Indiana homes.

Non-artists such as John Glessner and Jane Addams also exemplify Midwestern migrants' longing for and continued attachment to small-town roots. Glessner, a wealthy manufacturer who hired Henry Hobson Richardson to design his house on South Prairie Avenue, retained close ties with his provincial hometown of Springfield, Ohio, where his family's company produced agricultural equipment. Addams moved from downstate Cedarville, Illinois, to become a pioneering urban sociologist. Yet her attitudes toward the poor, largely European immigrant populations Hull House served may have been influenced unconsciously, Spears suggests, both by her upbringing in a small, ethnically undiversified Midwestern town and by a latent ambivalence about her own immigrant identity.

As Spears's inclusion of non-literary figures suggests, his approach is more cross-disciplinary than it is literary-critical, and the book owes more to Foucault than it does to any critic produced by the University of Chicago.

For Dreiser scholars, *Chicago Dreaming* is particularly useful for illuminating the contemporary milieus, both rural and urban, from which *Sister Carrie* arose. Yet the chapters devoted to non-literary figures are not always joined seamlessly to the rest of the book's argument, and sometimes Spears's enlistment of contemporary Chicagoans in his project of elucidating modernism's genesis seems forced (especially in the case of Addams, I think). Dreiser scholars may also look in vain for a sustained discussion of naturalism or determinism, topics that would seem to be organically related to any larger consideration of desire's role in literature written near the turn of the century. Spears's cultural-historical bent legitimizes his employment of such terms as *desire*, *dreaming*, and *self-making*, yet the book never clearly defines them. Also, Spears's effort to consolidate all the various historical figures he discusses within the premises of his argument impels him to count somewhat compulsively the number of times words like "longing," "desire," and "crave" appear in specimen texts. The concept of desire does not lend itself to being treated so quantitatively, and his argument is strong enough anyway that it doesn't need to be shored up in this fashion.

Spears's book makes a solid contribution to Chicago- and American Studies. His argument that some of modernism's roots may be discerned in rural mid-America is a needed corrective to the too-prevalent assumption that modernism is purely the byproduct of a fragmented, thoroughly urbanized consciousness. Dreiser scholars will profit from Spears's informed discussion of the larger cultural circles in which their author moved, and the book is particularly useful for understanding his fellow Hoosiers' prominence during the Chicago Renaissance.

—James Guthrie, Wright State University

A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature, by Bill Brown. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. xiii + 245 pp. Paper, \$16.00.

With *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*, Bill Brown offers a fresh and compelling perspective on materialism in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century American literature. Through detailed explications of novels by Mark Twain, Frank Norris, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Henry James, Brown examines objects, habit, fetishism, and decoration to create an image of the way literature constructed and considered "things" in the period immediately preceding modernism. While the text focuses on fictional representations of things and "thingness," the author juxtaposes these images with the "real" objects that permeated each au-

thor's environment. Brown is ultimately concerned with establishing a critical conversation about "things" within a scholarly culture that has lost sight of objects' importance and the truth with which ordinary items can be invested. William Carlos Williams demanded "No ideas but in things," and *A Sense of Things* attempts to uncover the profundity lurking within America's fascination with her "things."

Throughout the book, Brown remains grounded in the "thing" as such, eschewing broad generalizations from any specific "thing." The examples from each author's text (or life) are the content of his book, and Brown's theory and praxis are inextricably linked. He proposes a reconsideration of material objects, but rather than elaborate abstractly on the reasons for such reconsideration, he demonstrates what specific objects say about specific authors. His discussion of Frank Norris's work is the most relevant to the study of Theodore Dreiser and serves as an example of the highly specific way in which Brown examines an author's fictional objects to better understand the author and his work.

After examining the tyranny of objects and commodity fetishization as revealed in Twain's *Prince and the Pauper* in his first chapter, Brown moves forward in chapter two to the turn-of-the-century and Norris. He examines iterative narration, habit, and possession in *McTeague* to provide a view of naturalism's psychological determinism. McTeague is, by most accounts, a man who does nothing more nor less than his capabilities allow; his fate is inevitable. Brown, however, illuminates Norris's "philosophy of habit," which dictated his protagonist's actions. Many of McTeague's actions are described in perpetuity: he *would* do something—the same thing—every day. Disruptions of habit lead to McTeague's fate, but these same disruptions of iterative action allow Norris to create a sustained narrative; without them, *McTeague* is a series of habits, not a story. Brown also discusses possession, specifically Trina's removal of her golden lottery winnings from the marketplace and her appreciation of gold as an aesthetic object, aside from any exchange value under Capital. Trina's hoarding transforms gold from an object with use value to a fetishized commodity. The author uses both McTeague's habits and the manic possessiveness of other Norris characters to comment on an emerging culture of misused objects and the epistemological discomfort that arises when a familiar object is stripped of its routine use and made strange. The power of "things" lies in their ability not only to structure the mundane but also to transcend the commonplace in moments of conflict. It is in this recognition that Brown offers his most significant contribution to the study of naturalistic literature. The novels of both Norris and Dreiser are filled with routine and the objects

that both structure and disrupt routine. *A Sense of Things* establishes a preliminary matrix for evaluating the often neglected “things” that appear in, and profoundly affect, the Naturalists’ fiction.

In his remaining two chapters, Brown discusses Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) and James’s *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897), exploring how objects outside of the text affect authors and their texts and the ways in which the literary understanding of “things” was shifting around 1900. Brown’s focus on turn-of-the-century literature is intended to illuminate the American ideology of materialism that led to modernism. For Brown, naturalism’s view of “things” was directly responsible for the modernistic view that followed. Jewett’s regionalism and James’s mildly embarrassed fascination with “things” are indicative of the various manifestations of objects in pre-modern American literature. A further exploration is necessary, but Brown offers a strong example and paves the road for future research.

Bill Brown, with his typical perspicacity, has synthesized the Marxist materialism of Adorno and Benjamin with both phenomenology and the pragmatism of William James. In doing so, he posits a paradigm of pre-modern American literature that enables an understanding of the emergence of modernism and that reconsiders the role material things serve in Western culture. The study of all American literature can benefit from Brown’s work, but much more remains to be done in the period he discusses. His thorough explications of Twain, Norris, Jewett, and James must be supplemented by further examination of realist, regionalist, and naturalist fiction. Brown only scratches the surface of Dreiser’s work in his discussion of Carrie Meeber’s immersion in urban culture and the necessary inundation with materiality that accompanies it, but a further exploration of “things” in the lives of Carrie, Clyde Griffiths, Jennie Gerhardt, and Dreiser himself is in order. America’s objects reflect the nation’s values, and Brown offers a tantalizing glimpse of a complex relationship in which people and “things” alternately define each other.

—Dan Colson, Missouri State University

Frank Norris, A Life, by Joseph R. McElrath Jr. and Jesse S. Crisler. Urbana and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. xxii + 504 pp. Cloth, \$38.00.

Frank Norris is a difficult subject for a biographer. In 1902, at age 32, he died of a ruptured appendix just as he was achieving prominence—his novel

The Pit would become a best seller when it was published in 1903. His longer-lived contemporaries William Dean Howells, Hamlin Garland, and Theodore Dreiser left autobiographies celebrating their achievement, as did Norris's publishers Frank Doubleday and Walter Hines Page. For a biographer, autobiographies are perhaps most valuable for establishing the personality of one's subject, his reaction to his successes and failures, rather than for the chronology of events in the life, which are often magnified or suppressed altogether as the autobiographer succumbs to the natural tendency to make himself look good in posterity's eyes. But Norris died before he could reflect upon his life, before he could realize that his fiction would survive the moment. He did not retain most of his correspondence, and the 1906 San Francisco earthquake destroyed many papers. Still others were dispersed by his widow and brother as gifts, so the biographer's task of reconstructing his life faces impediments that have frustrated all would-be Norris biographers since the appearance of Franklin Walker's *Frank Norris: A Biography* in 1932.

Until now. In *Frank Norris, A Life*, Joseph R. McElrath Jr. and Jesse S. Crisler have meticulously pieced together the fragments of Norris's life as revealed through his writings and the remembrances of those who knew him, many of whom were interviewed by Franklin Walker as he researched his biography. Walker's notes of his interviews are the source for much of the portrait of Norris-the-man, as are the many tributes published upon the occasion of Norris's death. With few letters and no diaries to rely upon, the authors could call upon little else to sketch Norris's persona and instead have wisely chosen to tell much of Norris's life through an exhaustive examination of his work. Part detective story and part critical biography, *Frank Norris, A Life* painstakingly reveals the sources, motivations, and influences for most of Norris's *Wave* articles, his journalism, and his novels.

Most teachers of Norris's novels are familiar with the broad outlines of his life—his enrollment in creative writing courses at Harvard from 1894 to 1895, in which he drafted portions of *McTeague* and *Vandover and the Brute*; his work as a journalist for the San Francisco *Wave*, where he published "Zola as a Romantic Writer," "A Deal in Wheat," and other essays and stories; and his grand design for an "epic of the wheat," living only to complete *The Octopus* and *The Pit* before his death interrupted his plan for the third volume, *The Wolf*.

McElrath and Crisler fill in that broad outline by devoting extensive attention to Norris's early years. We learn of his parents' troubled marriage and its repercussions on Frank's adolescence. His mother, Gertrude Doggett, taught school and seemed destined for success on the stage until her

marriage to Benjamin Franklin Norris cut short her thespian ambitions. B. F. Norris was a wholesale jeweler and watchmaker who amassed a comfortable fortune but whose business required him to travel often. Ultimately, their growing estrangement led to a nasty divorce in 1893. There is a full account of Frank's early interest in art, his attendance in 1886 at the California School of Design (whose treasurer would provide the source for Old Grannis of *McTeague*) and at the Académie Julian in Paris, where he studied under the painter William Bouguereau from 1887 to 1889. From Bouguereau, who fused near-photographic treatment with romanticized subjects, McElrath and Crisler suggest, stems Norris's life-long tendency to combine realistic depiction with fanciful, even bizarre, subjects, such as Vandover's degeneration into a wolf and *McTeague*'s comic stupidity.

There is a full discussion of Norris's 1896 reportage of the escalating conflict between South Africa's Boers and Uitlanders (which would erupt in the Boer War of 1899–1902)—his first “grand adventure”—during which he enlisted in the Uitlander militia and was johnny-on-the-spot for the Jameson Raid, a failed coup by the Uitlanders. And McElrath and Crisler devote some 52 pages to his second grand adventure, his reportage of the Spanish-American War of 1898. On assignment for *McClure's* magazine and packing a gun, Norris sailed to Cuba to cover America's effort to punish Spain for the sinking of the *Maine*. Ironically, while his articles would appear in other newspapers and magazines, *McClure's* never published any of the pieces it had commissioned Norris to write—though it did publish his photographs of the surrender of General José Toral. Once again he was johnny-on-the-spot, for he was the only one with the forethought to bring a camera to the end of the Santiago campaign.

As one would expect, a full compositional history of Norris's major novels is one of the chief delights of the book, and readers will encounter an exhaustive account of their context, sources, influences, and publication. There is an equally full discussion of his courtship of Jeannette Black, whom he would marry in February 1900 and whom his mother would call “that hussy”—for Norris was a bit of a mamma's boy and Gertrude did not let go easily. No new information emerges in the authors' account of Norris's championship of *Sister Carrie* at the Doubleday firm, which the authors quite appropriately treat briefly as but one of the many episodes of Norris's professional life, but his advocacy on behalf of Dreiser, and at some risk to his job, illustrates Norris's essential kindness and generosity—qualities, the authors suggest, that are characteristic of his temperament.

Frank Norris, A Life is a magisterial, comprehensive critical biography that exhaustively documents its subject's literary life even as it relies pri-

marily upon inference for much of its personal portrait. The man that emerges is “kind, considerate, loyal to his friends, and devoid of the egotism that some may associate with the personalities of artistes.” His literary achievement in a handful of novels and essays is now meticulously revealed in a thoroughly engaging biography.

—Keith Newlin, University of North Carolina Wilmington

Realism and Naturalism: The Novel in an Age of Transition, by Richard Lehan. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005. xxxiv + 312 pp. Paper, \$22.95.

Richard Lehan's *Realism and Naturalism: The Novel in an Age of Transition* is an excellent intellectual history of realism and naturalism. Its overall purpose is twofold: to provide a comprehensive and wide-ranging perspective on French, Russian, American, and British realism and naturalism (which Lehan often treats as one: “realism/naturalism”); and to reposition realism/naturalism not as an evolutionary dead end on the way to modernism but as an essential component in the development of the novel, a “vortex through which the novel passed before it became modernism.”

Lehan states that his method is to work from the historical context through to the texts, and accordingly he reiterates some significant and long-held assumptions about realism and naturalism before beginning his analysis. For example, he reaffirms that realism and naturalism are a response to social change and an era of transition, especially as exemplified in the move from romantic visions of the countryside to the realities of an urban, industrialized consumer culture; he also notes that “realism/naturalism challenged a false idealism” and that Darwin's theories of evolution caused a seismic shift in nineteenth-century ideas of an ordered universe. Three chapters are devoted to the various theoretical concepts of forces—biological, cosmic, and sociopolitical—that shaped naturalist thought. But since this is a literary as well as a cultural history, Lehan also proposes a modal rather than a formal reading of realist/naturalist works: “A theory of modes assumes narrative similarity, a commonality, and is more generic than a theory of form. In a formal reading, form and history are considered to be separate entities; in a modal reading, text and history inform each other.”

The first three chapters illustrate this contextual exchange very well: Chapter 1, “Realism and Naturalism as an Expression of an Era,” moves among technological, scientific, and philosophical changes in the nineteenth

century, whereas Chapter 2, "Realism as a Narrative Mode," provides a capsule history of the realist novel from *Don Quixote* and Fielding through Dickens, George Eliot, Balzac, Dostoyevsky, and Mark Twain. Although the book is generally ordered chronologically, Lehan's modal approach dictates a structure based on "narrative similarity, a commonality," which has certain advantages. As the example of Chapter 2 suggests, organizing the discussion based on ideas allows Lehan to draw incisive parallels among the realist/naturalist works of several cultures or eras. In one such example, he notes that "the British novel of imperial adventure had its cultural counterpart in the American western"; in another, that "Hardy's *Jude* is the fictional son of Adam Bede; driven from the estate, he moves from cathedral town to cathedral town." Such flashes of insight, delivered almost casually in the service of a larger point, are among the book's pleasures. Another strength of the book lies in its historically grounded classifications and definitions, which provide not only the basis for Lehan's discussion but a literary taxonomy applicable to other texts. Chapter 3, for example, focuses not only on a host of themes in the realist/naturalist novel—money, the urban crowd, and the divided self, among others—but on the narrative sub-forms that constitute the novel: the gothic novel, the utopian novel, the young man/young woman from the provinces novel, the comedy of manners, and so on.

In writing about Dreiser, Lehan focuses on the influence of Spencer's *First Principles* and his theories of equilibrium and balance, "matter in motion," and the cyclical nature of life. All of these elements exist in *Sister Carrie*, with the novel's imagery of "spiraling circles" and characters existing in equilibrium: "Carrie looks forward; Hurstwood looks backward; Drouet is unchanging, a mediation between the two, content to live in the present." This principle of balance and equilibrium, especially of positive and negative forces, is at the heart of Dreiser's belief in a universe of force, but it also manifests itself in some unusual ways. Just as nature contains both elements, so too is Clyde Griffiths in *An American Tragedy* split between two social classes and two selves. Defending Dreiser against Lionel Trilling's charge that his philosophy is inconsistent, Lehan argues that the inconsistency is beside the point; in his fiction, Dreiser's aim was to show conflict, not consistency. In this respect, Dreiser reflects the principles of naturalism, which has a mechanistic view of reality in contrast to modernism's organic view and is inherently contradictory as a form.

In the last two chapters, "Current Transformations" and "Critical Transformations," Lehan discusses relatively recent naturalist fiction by Don DeLillo, Joyce Carol Oates, James T. Farrell, and Willard Motley and a few critics of realism and naturalism such as Philip Fisher, June Howard, Mark

Seltzer, and Walter Benn Michaels. Lehan clearly has little patience with what he sees as New Historicist interpretations that seem to treat realist/naturalist texts as locked in some textual *folie à deux* with equally fictitious and socially constructed versions of history or science. Lehan's assumptions—that events in history and the laws of science exist as something other than shifting discursive formations—lead him to observe rather pointedly that there is a world beyond the text: "Entropy, for example, is a physical law, not a cultural construct." For Lehan, the real problem is that such an approach eliminates the boundaries that allow naturalism to exist as a mode, which in turn divorces the mode from its history. In dismantling the totalizing "master narratives" of defined forms such as realism/naturalism, Lehan argues, postmodern criticism disrupts the ability of readers to make comparative judgments and read across cultures.

Making comparative judgments, reading across cultures, and above all explaining with clarity and insight the transformations of the novel of realism and naturalism are all what Lehan does well. Since this is an intellectual history, some of the approaches to the novels will seem familiar to many readers, but the connections among disciplines and texts, the theoretical framework, and the overall richness of discussion and breadth of knowledge make this an interesting and valuable work.

—Donna M. Campbell, Washington State University

News & Notes

Richard Lingeman's new book is *Double Lives: American Writers' Friendships*, published by Random House on April 25. In it he covers seven friendships of major American writers from Hawthorne and Melville to Kerouac and Ginsberg. He devotes a chapter to Dreiser and Mencken, which was drawn from an article he published some years ago in the *New York Times Book Review*. That article gave him the idea of doing a book on other such friendships.

Clare Eby's edition of Dreiser's 1911 *The Genius* in the next publication in the Dreiser Edition, published by the University of Illinois Press. The Dreiser Edition will also include a volume entitled *Dreiser's Political Writings: 1895–1945*, edited by Jude Davis.

Conference Reminder

Chester, Grace, and Dreiser: The Birth of *An American Tragedy* will be held June 22–24, 2006, in Herkimer, NY. For details, see the conference posting on the Dreiser Society web site: <<http://www.uncw.edu/dreiser/announcements.htm>>

Contributors

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